

External quality assurance in the time of COVID-19

Case examples from ENQA member agencies

Learning from each other is beneficial at any time. But even more so in times of crisis. The following case examples have been provided by ENQA members and affiliates to give insight and share experience on how external quality assurance agencies are adapting to the circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Actions and challenges covered include dealing with legal obstacles for recognising online education and extending accreditation validity, moving site visits online, maintaining dialogue with stakeholders, and providing support and guidance to higher education institutions.

We would be delighted to receive additional examples from other agencies that are members or affiliates of ENQA. Contributions should be maximum 1 page and could cover the following topics:

- What were your agency's immediate actions?
- Are you moving site visits online?
- Do you encounter any regulatory issues?
- What are you doing to directly support institutions?
- Other matters of strategic importance to your agency according to your context

Please send your contribution to Anna Gover (anna.gover@enqa.eu).

Resources can also be shared on social media under #QAfromHome.

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AEQES – Belgium

Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, French speaking community in Belgium

May 2020



Since mid-March AEQES has postponed all site visits planned for the remainder of the academic year. This amounts to seven programme evaluations and four pilot institutional evaluations, representing 13% of our total expected site visit days for the year. These have been rescheduled for the end of 2020 due to uncertainty around the length of the lockdown measures in Belgium. This, in turn, has had a significant impact on the overall planning of our external quality assurance activities. Concretely, we decided to extend the pilot phase for institutional evaluations by an additional year so to spread the activities over that extended period. This is also in order to take into consideration the extra workload that the COVID-19 crisis has brought for higher education institutions.

Because the pilot phase for institutional evaluations was agreed by the Government and is written as an amendment in our legal framework, we had to make sure the Government would agree to this change, as well as taking considerable time to explain the new planning to individual higher education institutions.

At the back of our minds, we now realise that we may well have to re-plan everything again in the autumn if things are not yet back to normal. Thankfully, our higher education system is not based on accreditation, so we do not face problems of expiring accreditations or issues or recognition.

In the meantime, because 87% of the reviews for this academic year have been done, we are now fully occupied with supporting the experts in the production of their review reports. To reflect the pressure currently facing institutions, we have lengthened the time allowed for them to respond to their reports from three weeks to six weeks.

Simultaneously we are reflecting on if and how to perform virtual visits: Are these possible? Desirable? Negotiable? Besides convincing reluctant experts or institutions, we also have to consider thorny issues such as how to guarantee the confidentiality of the virtual conversations and how to organise the proper consultation of additional documents.

Strategy for action of AQU Catalunya in the exceptional circumstances resulting from the effects of SARS-COV-2 coronavirus

Context and AQU's Contingency Plan

Royal Decree 463/2020, 14 March, whereby a state of emergency was declared to deal with the public health crisis situation due to COVID-19, provides for the suspension of administrative deadlines for the handling of procedures by public sector entities in Spain.

It is important to remark that the conditions at the present time and during the coming months will make in-person assessment and the safety of all those taking part in the assessment procedure extremely complicated. AQU Catalunya is therefore planning and carrying out site visits via videoconferencing for all faculties, schools and programmes that submitted self-assessment reports according to the planned timetable, wherever this is possible and taking into account the opinion of the universities involved.

AQU Catalunya activated its [Contingency Plan](#) whereby, as of 16 March 2020, all of the Agency's activities are now being undertaken online.

Guidance to higher education system

AQU Catalunya has prepared different documents in order to provide guidance to higher education sector:

- [Considerations of AQU Catalunya on the state of emergency and teaching in higher education](#) (12 May 2020)
- [Protocol for action for the accreditation of recognised degree programmes](#) (12 May 2020)
- [Protocol for action in the VSMA Framework due to the effects of the SARS-COV-2 coronavirus](#) (12 May 2020)
- [VSMA framework actions by AQU Catalunya due to the effects of SARS-COV-2 coronavirus](#) (13 March 2020)

Programme accreditation and IQAS certification

All site visits will be undertaken by way of video link from March to December 2020. It is important to mention that AQU Catalunya ensures the same quality of the assessment procedure and results won't be affected by the online format. Training sessions are important in order to explain the new format of the site visit. AQU Catalunya has already trained 44 experts.

AQU Catalunya has already finished 5 site visits at programme level which include the assessment of 9 degree programmes. It is worth mentioning that before summer AQU Catalunya has planned 3 site visits linked to IQAS certification and 13 more at programme level.

Perceptions of virtual site visits

Universities participating in this new format were a little bit sceptical with the new format and worried about the possible impact of the procedure on the result of the programme accreditation. This perception has changed after having the experience and they show their satisfaction to AQU Catalunya through informal channels.

Hungarian Accreditation Committee operations during the COVID-19 lockdown

The pandemic reached Hungary on 4 March 2020, when the first cases in the country were announced. The first Coronavirus (COVID-19)-related deaths were reported on the government's official website on 15 March 2020. Already on March 7, the government announced the cancellation of all public events including the ceremonies of Hungary's national holiday on 15 March 2020 and a state of emergency was instituted on 11 March 2020. Already some ten days prior to that, the president of the Hungarian Accreditation Committee (HAC) asked all Board and staff members who had travelled in the past two weeks not to come to the HAC offices. From March on, all meetings were cancelled and staff began to work from home on 12 March 2020. On 18 March 2020, the surgeon general announced that the virus had spread to every part of the country.

Since then, the HAC has implemented online Board meetings, expert committee meetings and site visit interviews online via Microsoft Teams. All meeting participants are provided with data protection information that they have to accept and return online. The HAC has for many years conducted its monthly Board meetings via its TIR (HAC's Information System) database, where all documents are uploaded and a secure platform enables voting. Meeting participants have received access to TIR after they had submitted their IP codes to the system manager who enabled personal access to the meeting-related documents and the actual voting platform of TIR available from the member's home or office. Every meeting was assisted by the HAC technical staff and went surprisingly smoothly from the start on.

All participants of the online meetings received a guide with very detailed technical instructions, not only for how to use the online tool but also how to access documents, how to vote, how persons with conflicts of interest with the case being discussed would be excluded from access and vote during discussions of that case, and similar information, prior to the meetings. The relevant section in the HAC procedural regulations was amended to include online meeting and voting procedures. For site visit interviews the programme officer in charge prepares the minutes of the meeting based on a template, which includes technical information related to the online process, including the legal disclaimer concerning audio recordings of the meetings.

Addressing higher education institutions and the public, the HAC president published a [Statement on procedures carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic](#) on 31 March 2020 in both Hungarian and English. For upcoming site visits of institutions or doctoral schools – the two important ex post evaluations performed in every fifth year – were asked about their availability for online “site visits” with the various groups to be interviewed. The students of doctoral schools were not interviewed online; rather they were sent an online questionnaire with questions touching all important issues related to doctoral school's ESG compliance. Furthermore, all traditional contact options (e.g. phone, e-mail), are available in order to secure the information change and consultations between the programme officers and institutions, doctoral schools, Board members and expert committee chairs and members.

NCPA – Russia

National Centre of Public Accreditation, Russia
June 2020

What were your agency's immediate actions?

NCPA has discussed the current situation with the staff and the founders of the agency, took into account ENQA statement on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on quality assurance agencies, studied foreign experience and moved to remote activities.

NCPA developed methodological materials (guidelines for HEIs, experts and NCPA coordinators) and launched online accreditation.

Are you moving site visits online?

NCPA carries out online accreditation using the ZOOM platform which enables to involve up to 100 participants and meets technical requirements to ensure the quality of expertise.

Do you encounter any regulatory issues?

The Ministry of Higher Education and Science of the Russian Federation has issued a series of orders and recommended that HEIs cancel face-to-face classes and resort to distance learning. So NCPA is working according to the current legislation.

What are you doing to directly support institutions?

Firstly, NCPA studied best practices (US, Europe and Asia-Pacific region) and posted thematic analysis on the website. These materials are open to HEIs and cover such topics as International practice of switching to e-learning during COVID-19, Higher education and COVID-19, US Higher Education and COVID-19. So institutions can familiarise themselves with the materials in the public domain on NCPA official [website](#).

Secondly, NCPA advises HEIs remotely upon request.

Other matters of strategic importance to your agency according to your context

Higher education assessment system is likely to change and become more flexible using combination of both site-visits and online expertise. Distant tools will be developed further and best practices can be affectively used to carry out evaluation activities.

QAA – United Kingdom

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, United Kingdom

May 2020



QAA operates several different quality review approaches, including different methodologies in Wales, England, Northern Ireland and Scotland because Higher Education is devolved to the different administrations within the UK. Since mid-March QAA has completed quality review activity where this could be carried out by desk-based methods, but has postponed all planned in person, physical, site visits for the remainder of the academic year. These in person visits have been rescheduled. Some quality review visits in England have been able to be undertaken via virtual means, with close collaboration between the providers, regulator and QAA. Given the likelihood that some degree of social distancing will still be required, we are developing all of our quality review visit methodologies so that they can possibly be undertaken either in whole or in part through virtual methods. We recognise this will be challenging and are particularly keen to ensure that the opportunities for exchanging views and the richness of dialogue more typical of in person visits will be realised irrespective of the mode of review. In view of this we are actively considering which aspects of review visits might best be carried out in person should some restrictions be lifted. Regulators (and equivalent bodies) in the UK have recognised that institutions need to focus on planning for the new academic year and delivering a high-quality experience for students. However, they are also keen to see reviews undertaken again in the Autumn.

QAA has provided guidance to the HE sector on a wide range of immediate issues. This guidance is available on the [QAA website](#). The guidance and supporting resources include:

- Initial Guidance for HE Providers on Standards and Quality
- Thematic Guidance – Practice and Lab-based assessment
- Thematic Guidance – Securing Academic Standards and Supporting Student Achievement
- Thematic Guidance – Accelerated Degrees
- Thematic Guidance – Work-based learning
- A range of supporting materials to support good practice in online delivery and engaging and supporting students
- A scan of international policy and practice
- ‘No detriment’ policies: an overview of intended impact
- Arguments for and against including a ‘COVID-19 Statement’ on degree transcripts
- Academic integrity in digital delivery

In addition, QAA has established a discussion forum for providers and stakeholder agencies and run a well subscribed series of webinars and online events to share practice and promote discussion.

Handling the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic

What were your agency's immediate actions?

The Board wrote to all the rectors to communicate a consistent message about the Board's awareness of the effects of the pandemic on the universities and its commitment to work with the sector to find mitigating solutions (<https://qef.is/news-events/sample-news-article-4/>). All reviews after mid-March were postponed. Board meetings and meetings with stakeholders have continued online. The Board Secretariat conducted phone interviews with Quality Managers of all the universities in mid-April to gather information about each university's responses to the pandemic, with a special emphasis on teaching and assessment.

Are you moving site visits online?

At the present time, there are no plans to conduct site visits online. However, that may change if travel restrictions continue to be in effect into the Autumn months of 2020.

Do you encounter any regulatory issues?

No. The Icelandic higher education system is not based on temporary accreditation, and there are no specifications in the regulatory framework about whether a review must include a physical site visit. Any arrangements for online visits would have to be decided with the universities, and through consultation with National Union of Icelandic Students and the Ministry.

What are you doing to directly support institutions?

Each Board member meets annually with the management team and student representatives of one or two universities to take stock of, and discuss, recent developments, including those related to the quality enhancement agenda. This year, all meetings will be online and are scheduled for June. In addition to the regular agenda, the discussion will also cover the university's response to the health crisis, key lessons, planning for the next academic year and any changes to the long-term strategic development. These meetings involve open discussion of strengths and weaknesses, as well as feedback from Board representative on the university's quality enhancement agenda. Information gathered in these meetings will also be discussed in the subsequent Board meeting and further support will possibly be provided in the light of identified sector-wide issues.

Further support to the universities is provided via the Quality Council (QC), an advisory body to the Quality Board comprised of all the universities' Quality Managers and two representatives of the National Union of Icelandic Students. A Secretariat member attends the QC meetings as an observer. The QC serves as a forum for resource sharing across the universities, and the Secretariat has used that forum to keep track of shared issues across the university sector and communicate European and international developments in quality assurance.