GUIDELINES FOR DISTANCE EVALUATION

CEEQA NETWORK GUIDELINES

AUTHORS:
Klemen Šubic (NAKVIS)
Nataša Kramar (NAKVIS)
Prof. Olgun Çiček, Ph.D. (YÖDAK)

CONTRIBUTORS:
NAKVIS
YÖDAK
ACQUIN
NAB
EKKKA
IAAR
AIKA
HEPDAK
NAQA
AQ

SEPTEMBER 2021
INTRODUCTORY NOTE BY KLEMEN ŠUBIC

The presented guidelines are a document of the CEENQA association, the purpose of which is to offer all members an additional or sometimes even alternative aspect on what is already in use in a different national context, taking into account the specifics of the legislative and procedural frameworks already in place. The guidelines could serve as an alternative view and an opportunity for CEENQA members to improve the organisation and conduct of online site visits also by exchanging some adequate and transferrable good practices (where relevant).

These guidelines are not intended to unify procedural steps between all CEENQA member agencies, as they do not constitute an obligation for them, but rather to provide additional input in how the site visit could be organised, what kind of circumstances should be taken into account and in what timeframe. They are a step towards sharing different practices and solutions to the challenges faced by agencies in organising and conducting online site visits, during and after the pandemic restrictions.

The basis for this document was taken from the national NAKVIS guidelines and supplemented with suggestions and specifics that CEENQA members highlighted in the answers to the questionnaire on organisational specifics of online site visits. The substantive aspect of the assessments is deliberately omitted from the guidelines, as differences between countries are substantial and therefore not relevant for such a document.

The aim is to provide guidance where needed, and to ask the right questions about what the important organisational challenges of online assessments are, as well as to indicate possible ways to address them.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE BY PROFESSOR OLGUN ÇIÇEK, Ph.D.

Not only teaching and learning have been deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic; similarly, all traditional forms of external quality assurance also needed to undergo a serious modification. Since March 2020, most agencies have adopted virtual approaches to evaluations, reviews, and site visits as a consequence of COVID-19.

Therefore, CEENQA Board has decided to prepare and publish a set of guidelines for its member agencies on online evaluation for the quality assurance of their virtual assessment. This guideline also intends to promote the consistency of the evaluation among the member agencies.

This paper is an outcome of extensive work performed by the participation and contribution of the member agencies through a detailed survey, as well as workshop organised by CEENQA.

I especially thank the NAKVIS team for the initiation of the guideline and the President, Professor Franci Demšar, Ph. D., for his commitment and leadership. I also thank all agencies who responded to the survey with valuable input to finalise the guideline. The presentations of the agencies about the implementation, challenges and best practices of the online evaluations became the backbone of this guideline. Special thanks also to the CEENQA Board for their initiative and commitment at every stage of this valuable guideline.
I sincerely hope that the guidelines will be useful and valuable for our members on their online evaluations.

GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING A DISTANCE EVALUATION

I am sure this will be a very practical and valuable tool for the member agencies in their virtual evaluations for the post pandemic era. The purpose of this guideline is to help and direct member agencies to find the practical information and tools for online evaluation. This will be a reference point for agencies during the time of force majeure.

CEENQA will be ready and willing to provide training/workshop on the technical issues and practices of this guideline for member agencies whenever needed.

In individual cases the evaluation of a higher education institution can be conducted exclusively remotely with the use of online tools (for example, Zoom, Skype, Google Meet, Jitsi or another platform).

In order to conduct a remote evaluation, the agency provides a virtual conferencing platform.

1. PRIOR TO THE EVALUATION

The planning of remote evaluation requires mainly the following:

1. In order to participate in evaluation discussions, the group of experts, the institution and all participants are required to have functioning equipment (computer with microphone and camera or other smart device – e.g., smartphone, tablet) and a good internet connection. Use of headphones and a headset microphone is recommended.

2. It is recommended that few days prior to the evaluation an agency employee and the coordinator at the higher education institution (HEI) test the online platform (e.g. Zoom, MS Teams, GoToMeeting, Google Meet, Jitsi, Skype, etc.). Several potential participants could participate in a test meeting. The purpose of such meeting could be for the agency employees to present the course and dynamics of the remote evaluation to the representatives of the institutions. The purpose of the test meeting is mainly to check the operation of online platforms in use and discuss the issues related to the technical part of the evaluation and to prepare the participants for it.

3. In case of technical issues with the online platform in use an alternative online platform (Zoom, Google Meets, Skype, Jitsi, etc.) should be verified and provided. All the participants should be informed about this prior to the actual evaluation.

4. Schedule preparation: Considering the dynamics and the way a remote evaluation is conducted, careful and prudent planning is needed. One of the possibilities is that the discussion with individual group of interlocutors is expected to last from 45 to 90 minutes, followed by a 15-25 minutes break in order to summarise the findings and prepare for the
next discussion. Depending on the procedure (as well as the availability of participants, their number and position etc.), the time slots dedicated for each discussion session may vary. It is recommended that the agency and the applicant HEI agree on the maximum number of participants attending each discussion session/interview in order to guarantee an adequate time slot for constructive debate and discussions to each group of interviewees. A discussion should be held with all relevant stakeholders in order to evaluate the compliance with the quality standards and provisions of assessment. The chair of the group agrees with an agency employee on the agenda. It is recommended that the initial and final discussions are held with the management of the HEI.

5. Site visit agenda may include active online links to the meetings and sessions scheduled, but also a list of participants with their titles and roles in the evaluation procedure. It is recommended that all participants and experts are informed about the site visit agenda in time (including active meeting links and list of participants), for example at least one week before the site visit takes place.

6. In order to agree on the content and solve any technical issues, it is recommended that an agency employee organises a preparatory meeting with the group of experts at least a week prior to the evaluation.

7. It is recommended that before the evaluation the group of experts prepares a comprehensive draft report based on documentation and discusses the remaining issues. The group can prepare a list of additional documentation that the HEI provides on the first day of the evaluation. Together with an agency employee the group revises the draft report, questions and potential additional documentation. For the technical part, cameras and microphones of all participants need to be tested, as well as the functioning of an alternative online platform.

2. DURING THE EVALUATION

1. Depending on the site visit form (fully online or hybrid), the experts join the meeting room (online or on site). The agency staff shall be responsible for the procedure and also for providing technical support when possible and needed. It is recommended that foreign experts participate in the evaluation procedure online/via video conference.

2. In order to ensure smooth notification and prompt response (in case of technical difficulties or non-attendance for exceptional circumstances), an agency employee and the coordinator at the institution maintain contact by phone if needed, or use adequate communication channels such as WhatsApp, Telegram etc.

3. A moderator is selected; this is the chair of the group of experts or a person temporary appointed by the chair. The moderator allocates and monitors time, assigns the floor to individual participants and ensures compliance with the principles of professional and respectful communication.

4. Every participant is required to join the meeting 5 minutes prior to its beginning. The use of the “waiting room” function in the video-conferencing platform is recommended to enable the participants to join the meeting in order and according to schedule. The group of experts and an agency employee are present in the online conference room throughout
the conversations. Participants involved in discussions join them individually. For the purpose of discussions, participants should use full and proper names as their user names. Several people under one username/computer in a meeting room, two people on the same computer/username on the desk should be avoided.

5. All participants in the conversation follow the rules of respectful conduct and online communication (raising hand before speaking, turning off the microphone when not speaking, being tolerant and respectful in communication). All participants as well as the members of the group of experts are required to have their cameras on throughout the discussion.

6. Assessment of material conditions: according to instructions of an agency employee and the group of experts, the higher education institution records a video of premises used for the implementation of the study programme, premises of the whole institution/college (laboratory, library, the premises for students and equipment for the implementation of the study programme) when assessing material conditions. The video should not be longer than 15 minutes. During the remote evaluation in the presence of the representative of the institution/college, the group of experts reviews the video and resolves the open issues. The whole or part of the group of experts can physically visit the premises if necessary. The visit of the premises and equipment is conducted for study programmes and institutions/colleges when appropriate and necessary.

7. At the end of each evaluation day, the group of experts shall meet in closed session to discuss the findings, conclusions, remaining outstanding issues and additional evidence necessary for a comprehensive evaluation, if needed. This follow-up session is also intended for formulating the highlighted points (findings, conclusions) that are to be included in the evaluation report.

8. On the final day of the evaluation, the discussions are held only in the morning. The afternoon is intended for finalising the joint report. It is recommended that the Google Docs application is used for drafting and updating the report.
Appendix 1

Good practices and challenges identified by CEENQA members

The survey that was done in May 2021 helped the authors a lot with preparing the guidelines. However, the agencies also highlighted some good practices or challenging situations, which could not be included in the document. These are shared here and we hope that we will continue with exchanging of good practices and with sharing experiences.

Evaluation of material conditions

This issue has been mentioned the most and remains a challenge. Agencies opted for live virtual tours with a camera or photos and videos prepared before the site visit. However, experiences with such solutions vary and many predict that they will opt for a physical visit of the premises when the situation allows.

Confidentiality of online meetings

Site visits in a virtual environment raise certain issues and one of them that was mentioned by agencies is ensuring the confidentiality of the meetings with stakeholders. The meetings could easily be recorded with various computer tools without anyone knowing. Besides the interviewee, other people can be present in a room who were not invited and can influence the answers. There are more solutions to these problems, from signing a confidentiality agreement to focusing on establishing mutual trust.

Interim day

Management of the breaks between interviews and so-called “Zoom fatigue” present a problem, especially when visits are longer. A potential solution to be considered is an interim day, where no interviews take place. The experts can focus on additional documentation, available databases, fact-checking, updating the draft report, etc. In addition, the group of experts can also prepare concluding remarks and formulate thematic questions for the following day(s). While this extends evaluation for one day, it can help with restoring the focus and mental preparedness of the group of experts.

Preparing the questions

Preliminary meetings and compiling the questions have generally become easier with the help of online tools. Therefore, the group of experts can gather the written questions before the site visit, which consequently enables a better exchange and extensive discussion between the group of experts and the HEI.

Hybrid model

As we look into the future and try to combine good practices from face-to-face and virtual site visits into a new model, one option is to include HEIs in this decision. Especially when it is not the first re-accreditation cycle, HEIs could be presented with an option of the site visit form: online site visit, physical site visit, or blended form. There are possible legislative restrictions; however, it is worth considering how to include opinions of HEIs in the potentially different future models.
Training of experts

In various trainings of experts, the online format can now be easily used. Instead of traditional one-day training sessions, several shorter sessions with further independent and group-work are possible. The experience show that such format is more efficient, but requires clear goal, focus and structure and clear communication concerning expectations on the preparatory work.
Appendix 2

SAMPLE SCHEDULE IN THE PROCEDURE OF EVALUATION OF A STUDY PROGRAMME (two-day site visit): DAY ONE

*The information provided in the sample schedule is solely for the purpose of illustrating how to organise a two-day online site visit. The schedule can differ significantly in the case of several daily visits and in different procedures (initial accreditation, institutional procedures, etc.).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meeting</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Hour</th>
<th>Attendees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preliminary meeting of the group of experts/ contact with institutional management and review of potential difficulties</td>
<td>The group of experts</td>
<td>7.40–8.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A short virtual visit of the premises and equipment at the institution/in relation to the study programme evaluation</td>
<td>Representatives of the institution (management, coordinator)</td>
<td>8.00–8.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants of the first discussion join the meeting</td>
<td></td>
<td>8.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discussion with higher education teachers</strong></td>
<td>Discussion with higher education teachers (employed and contractual - all titles + faculty assistants)</td>
<td>8.30–10.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Break</td>
<td></td>
<td>10.00–10.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants of the second discussion join the meeting</td>
<td></td>
<td>10.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discussion with students and alumni</strong></td>
<td>Discussion with students of all grades + alumni</td>
<td>10.30–12.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunch break</td>
<td></td>
<td>12.00–13.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants of the third discussion join the meeting</td>
<td></td>
<td>13.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discussion with the evaluation team</strong></td>
<td>Discussion with the evaluation team + head of the study programme</td>
<td>13.30–15.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Break</td>
<td></td>
<td>15.00–15.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants of the fourth discussion join the meeting 15.25

**Discussion with representatives of the external environment**
Discussion with representatives of external environment, mentors of practical training 15.30–17.00

Final meeting of the group and preparation for the second evaluation day 17.00–17.30

* When seeking and choosing the participants (students) who are not student representatives, the institution/college should cooperate with the student council.

**THE SECOND EVALUATION DAY***

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meeting</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Hour</th>
<th>Attendees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preliminary meeting of the group of experts</td>
<td>The group of experts</td>
<td>8.00–8.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants of the fifth discussion join the meeting</td>
<td></td>
<td>8.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discussion with the specialist services</strong></td>
<td>Discussion with the representatives of support services</td>
<td>8.30–10.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Break</td>
<td></td>
<td>10.00–10.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants of the sixth discussion join the meeting</td>
<td></td>
<td>10.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discussion with the institutional management, heads of programmes</strong></td>
<td>Discussion with the institutional management + if needed also heads of departments, chair of the evaluation team...</td>
<td>10.30–12.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunch break</td>
<td></td>
<td>12.00–13.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Drafting a joint report</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>13.30–15.30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The final presentation to representatives of the higher education institution</td>
<td></td>
<td>15.30–16.30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
*Upon the decision of the group of experts, a site visit of particular premises and equipment might be needed and scheduled for the second evaluation day. It is conducted to a minor extent (an agency employee and the chair of the group) whereby instructions and recommendations to prevent spread of infection are considered. After the evaluation the group of experts continues with video call discussions (in a safe location of the institution or in the agency premises).

RECOMMENDATION TO EXPERTS AFTER THE EVALUATION

It is recommended that after an evaluation the group of experts meets once again (on the same or the following day while impressions are still fresh) and completes the substantive part of the evaluation report. The group of experts has enough time for editing the style of the report until the submission deadline.