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# Newsletter

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CEENQA is adapting to times of pandemic. Virtual meetings and workshops dominated the second half of 2020, such as during the first bi-monthly meeting, hosted on 15 September.



## Message from the President

### Dear CEENQA members, colleagues and friends,

In my September letter, I have written that we are experiencing very trying times in our private and professional lives because of the current epidemic situation and unfortunately, I was right, we still cannot foresee the end of the pandemic.

In this period, we have successfully established a new CEENQA initiative – **regular web conferences and presentations**. These events are an opportunity for the member agencies to present their activities, good practices, thematic analysis, common projects and other interesting topics to other members in three 15-minute time slots. The same time will be allocated to discussion as well. Cooperation and harmonisation between member agencies are the core objectives of CEENQA and these goals are now more important than ever. In September, Slovenia and North Cyprus had their presentations. Slovenia presented a methodology for studying independence of accreditation agencies. In this newsletter, work in progress is shortly presented based on the results of fifteen agencies that have responded. We encourage other agencies to take part in this study as well. In November, another meeting took place in which agencies from Czech Republic and BIH Republika Srpska had their presentations. BIH presented an overview of Quality of Teaching at Higher Education Institutions during the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Republika Srpska. The next bi-monthly meeting will take place in January 2021. Dates and agenda for upcoming meetings are published on the website, where information about the meetings and presentations are also available.

In October 2020, the Governing board had a meeting in which he discussed:

### Erasmus+ Projects

CEENQA, as a partner organization was successful in two Erasmus+ project applications, one relating to dual education in Kazakhstan, and one to the reform of the Moldavian Higher Education system. The Secretary General with support of the Presidents' office will manage the projects. CEENQA's activities in the projects will also involve peer review activities for which the support from CEENQA member organizations will be requested. More detailed information will be communicated once the situation arises.

### General Assembly 2021 and planning and preparation of the Workshop 2021

The upcoming General Assembly in spring 2021 in Istanbul will be postponed due to the ongoing pandemic into the late summer of that year. If by then travelling is still not possible the meeting will be held online. Concerning the workshop in the upcoming General Assembly two working groups on Online Evaluations (led by Olgun Cicek) and Online Teaching at Universities in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic (led by Duška Radmanović) will be assembling. Member states are encouraged to contact them directly at [olguncicek@yahoo.com](mailto:olguncicek@yahoo.com) and [d.radmanovic@hears.com](mailto:d.radmanovic@hears.com).



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## **International staff exchange**

The international staff exchange needs to adapt to the new pandemic circumstances. Members who are interested in taking part as an online observer in other members please contact our secretary general Martin Foerster ([foerster@asiin.de](mailto:foerster@asiin.de)).

If you have additional ideas, suggestions or questions, you are welcome to contact me at [franci.demsar@nakvis.si](mailto:franci.demsar@nakvis.si).

With best regards,

**Dr. Franci Demsar**

**President of CEENQA**



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## Upcoming Events

19 Jan 2021

Third bi-monthly CEENQA meeting

17 Mar 2021

Fourth bi-monthly CEENQA meeting

19 May 2021

Fifth bi-monthly CEENQA meeting

Summer 2021

CEENQA General Assembly and Workshop

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## A new call is launched for the CEENQA staff exchange scheme 2021

CEENQA is launching a new call to member agencies to participate in the staff exchange scheme in 2021.

Given the ongoing pandemic and uncertain outlook to the future with respect to international travel, the 2021 staff exchange is foreseen to take place **fully online**. The recommended activities to pursue include: online meetings, focus groups, presentations, job shadowing, etc. Observation of online site visits and of online training of experts is strongly recommended.

This is an excellent opportunity to share experience, learn from best practice and discuss various pressing topics of quality assurance with peers across the CEENQA platform. This call is open to agencies new to the scheme that wish to benefit from the network and knowledge represented in CEENQA, as well as to agencies that have found this mechanism useful in the past and seek to expand on the previous experience. The staff participating in the exchange can come from the lower level and mid-level staff as well as from the senior managerial staff and even Board members of agencies. The online format is especially favourable to the involvement of high-level agency representatives because there is no need to spend excessive time travelling. Possible topics that could be covered during staff exchange include, but are not limited to:

- ❖ Coping with the COVID-19 pandemic at HEIs and QAAs
- ❖ Institutional and/or program level evaluations
- ❖ Accreditation processes and criteria/standards
- ❖ Re-evaluation procedures for institutions and/or programs
- ❖ Rules and procedures for reporting
- ❖ Forming expert groups and training of experts
- ❖ Stakeholder involvement
- ❖ Web applications, databases and other technical solutions
- ❖ EU projects and international cooperation
- ❖ ENQA External Review process
- ❖ Internal quality assurance of agency

Agencies planning to host and/or send staff members for fully virtual staff exchange in 2021 are asked to **reply to this call by 10 January, 2021**. After collecting the responses from interested agencies, CEENQA will match mutually suitable agencies and put them in touch with each other to organize the details of staff exchange.



Please include the following information in your agency response:

- ❖ willingness to host and/or to send staff members for fully virtual staff exchange in 2021,
- ❖ willingness to be included on a permanent list of interested agencies that would eliminate the need to respond to individual calls for expressions of interest every year (with the possibility to opt-out in a given year),
- ❖ languages the involved staff members are able to use,
- ❖ specific subject of focus of the visit (if relevant),
- ❖ possible details about the agency's needs (i.e. proposed time period, particular requirements on partner agency, etc.) – however, please be mindful that depending on the other responses to the call, it might not be possible to accommodate all particular requests of the agency.

The responses to this call and any requests for more information should be sent to Dr Olgun Cicek, Board Member ([olguncicek@yahoo.com](mailto:olguncicek@yahoo.com)) **by 10 January, 2021**. Mark your calendars now!



## News from Members and Partners

### El Baasy News



#### The first steps of accreditation in Kyrgyzstan on the example of the accreditation agency "El Baasy"

Independent accreditation of educational organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic (hereinafter KR) has been carried out since September 1, 2016. Currently, the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic pays special attention to the implementation of accreditation processes in all educational organizations and institutions. Accreditation standards and criteria of the above "Minimum Requirement" were developed on the basis of European accreditation standards adopted in 2015 in Yerevan at a meeting of European education ministers who signed the Bologna Declaration.<sup>1</sup>

In Kyrgyzstan, accreditation is carried out by independent agencies created in the form of non-profit non-governmental organizations and recognized by the National Accreditation Council. Currently, 6 Kyrgyz and 1 foreign agencies (from the Republic of Kazakhstan) are recognized.

The accreditation procedure consists of three stages: self-assessment, external assessment and decision-making.

Self-assessment of an educational organization / program is carried out on the basis of the requirements of the State educational standards, as well as standards and criteria defined by the Agency in accordance with the Minimum Requirements for Accredited Educational Organizations of Primary, Secondary and Higher Professional Education of the Kyrgyz Republic.

The institution sends a self-assessment report to the accreditation agency, whose specialists study it and send it back with comments. The revised self-assessment report is sent for review to the members of the expert commission. The visit of experts to the educational institution for an external assessment lasts two days, after which a report of the expert commission is submitted. Reports are compiled on the basis of an assessment of compliance with accreditation standards and criteria. The total number of standards is 7, criteria.

If all standards are met (even with comments), the decision is made "Full accreditation for five years". If one or two standards are not fulfilled, the decision "Conditional accreditation for one year" is taken. If after one year all of these deficiencies are eliminated, the accreditation period is extended for four years. If more than two standards are not met, the decision "Do not accredit" is taken. A standard is considered to be incomplete if 1/3 of all its criteria are assessed as "not in compliance".

Decision-making is carried out by a simple majority of votes of members of the accreditation council established at the Agency for Accreditation of Educational Programs and Organizations. The council includes

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<sup>1</sup> Standards and guidelines for ensuring the quality of higher education in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). - Yerevan, May 14-15, 2015 - 32 p.





representatives of the state, professional communities and sectors of the economy.

Currently, educational institutions of Kyrgyzstan have begun to systematically work to improve the quality of professional education. The interaction of all interested parties has intensified. We pay special attention to the activities of employers, as it is they who are more interested in training a quality specialist. No less important is the annual monitoring of the implementation of the recommendations of expert commissions.

The management, employees and experts of the Independent Accreditation Agency Al-Ba'asy (hereinafter NAA) encountered the following problems during the program and institutional accreditation:

- There are various types of educational institutions that differ in the variety of areas and specialties of educational programs.
- In the framework of one educational organization of higher vocational and secondary vocational education there were duplicate structural units (institutes, colleges) for educating students and training personnel in one specialty.
- There were cases of non-fulfillment of licensing requirements related to the absence of a sports or assembly hall, as well as violations of the procedure for renting school premises of both public and private educational institutions.

The solution of such issues required the adoption of a balanced and informed decision. The Kyrgyz proverb says: "Kalk aytsa, kalp aypayt", which means: "People will not lie". Therefore, the name "El Baasy" is due to the fact that during accreditation we rely on the opinions of the people, that is, on the opinions of employers and society.

At this time, educational institutions have begun to realize that accreditation, as the main means of ensuring the necessary quality of education, allows you to take into account the interests of all parties interested in the development of education and combines public and state forms of control.

The practice of accreditation shows that in the future, evaluations of the activities of educational institutions need:

- ensure progress in education through the development of criteria and principles for assessing the effectiveness of education;
- stimulate the development of educational institutions and the improvement of educational programs through continuous self-examination and planning;
- guarantee to society that an educational institution or a specific educational program has correctly formulated goals and conditions for their achievement;
- provide assistance in the establishment and development of an educational institution and in the implementation of educational programs.

In this regard, in 2019, Al-Ba'asy NAA developed the second generation of standards and criteria for program and institutional accreditation.

Based on two years of experience in accreditation, we note that in the first place it is necessary to strengthen the role of self-examination of educational institutions, the results of which are considered as an important preliminary result of assessing the quality of their activities. This implies the need for further





development of the practice of reporting on various aspects of the activities of educational institutions, which should reflect:

- mission, goals and objectives of the educational institution, including in relation to ensuring the quality of education and the implementation of state educational standards;
- the structure of educational programs, their content, activities, requirements for the conditions for their implementation;
- organization of a system for ensuring the quality of education;
- the composition of students, their performance, as well as the assessment of students of training programs;
- the achievements of graduates, their success in the labor market and / or in the further continuation of education;
- The main financial indicators of the educational institution, the level of its resource support.

Given that the analysis of documents submitted for accreditation is carried out by an expert accreditation commission recognized as competent in the prescribed manner, special attention should be paid to the selection of experts who have special knowledge in the field of the subject of accreditation examination, have higher professional education and work experience in the field of educational or managerial activity for at least three years, meets the qualification requirements for experts performing the functions of developing quality assurance policy and legal regulation in the sphere of education.

The results of the accreditation examination are documented by the conclusion of the commission on accreditation examination and information on the conduct of accreditation examination is available on its official website of the El Baaasy NAA [www.elbaasy.kg](http://www.elbaasy.kg) on the Internet.

The conclusion of the commission on accreditation examination is considered by the collegial body of the El Ba'asy Accreditation Council. If the decision is positive, an accreditation certificate is issued, a certificate issued through Tartip CJSC. The certificate of accreditation sets the validity period of accreditation no more than five years. In case of refusal of accreditation, the Accreditation Agency, in agreement with the expert commission on accreditation, sends the applicant a letter with a reasoned refusal.

The accreditation certificate confirms the right of an educational institution to issue in the prescribed manner state-approved documents on the level of education and (or) qualifications for accredited educational programs.

If you need to change the name of the educational institution to bring it into line with its status or not fulfill one or two standards established during accreditation, a temporary accreditation certificate is issued, the validity of which is one year.



## KAA News

### KAA activities during the Covid-19

The first case of Covid-19 in Kosovo was reported on March 13, 2020, and in just a few days as a prevention measure for spreading the disease, the whole country was in isolation. Most of the Higher Education Institutions started online lectures in a very short time. Kosovo Accreditation Agency was in the phase of preparation for the evaluation process for the academic year 2020/2021, and the staff also started working from home. KAA was one of the first QA Agencies that started implementing online evaluation for the accreditation of Higher Education Institutions. By April 1<sup>st</sup>, the list of international experts was all prepared, and the State Council of Quality (SCQ) approved it.

Since the next step was organizing the site visits to the Higher Education Institutions, KAA requested the Ministry of Education and Science to do some minor adjustments to the legal framework in order to enable distance evaluation. This decision was taken at the optimal time, thus paving the way for an evaluation via distance, using the zoom platform.

Prior to the process of evaluation, KAA organized training with external evaluation experts for the accreditation standards that KAA implements. During the visits, KAA staff was present all the time at the HEIs, in order to verify all the information provided was accurate and in line with the standards. A total of 14 HEIs were evaluated in the institutional level.

As for the accreditation of programs, due to the delays caused from the lockdown, all new programs that applied for accreditation were postponed. Whilst the programs on re-accreditation underwent the evaluation. Thus, KAA ensured that the existing programs keeps the continuity and are not penalized due to the pandemic.

In October 2020, KAA went through an assessment / exercise related to the fulfillment of the ESG, organized by RCC (Regional Cooperation Council). The purpose of this exercise was to assist the countries of the Western Balkans in their preparations for membership in ENQA and registration in EQAR. Through this exercise, QA Agencies will have a better picture of their situation, and will identify gaps and shortcomings that could hinder their future ENQA membership and EQAR registration.

The evaluation was conducted by the Knowledge Innovation Center, and the site (online) visit took place on October 12 and 13, 2020. The expert team was connected through zoom, and KAA staff, SCQ and all the stakeholders were either present in the KAA offices, or connected online.



## NAQA News

### Maintaining trust in times of uncertainty

Overall lockdown, lack of face-to-face contacts, new challenges for all higher education stakeholders led to anxiety and uncertainty. At one moment HEIs, academicians, students, QA agencies got in the situation they never faced before. In such times it is of a great importance to maintain trust and to help HEIs to build up new procedures or to adapt the existing ones. In



Ukraine NAQA took the initiative on this matter and has been actively helping stakeholders to overcome the challenges.

In November 2020 NAQA Vice-Head Nataliia Stukalo had presented a study on "Increasing role of QA agencies during pandemic" within the EQAF 2020. She described how the role of QA agencies has changed over last half of the year.

NAQA bases its activities on the principles of trust and mutual respect, aiming to disseminate them in the Ukrainian academic environment. NAQA actively provides information and advisory support to stakeholders. NAQA is now very active in the media, because almost everything is moved to online. The official position of NAQA is posted on the website <https://naqa.gov.ua/>. [Facebook page](#) and Twitter page are created for communication and dynamic information sharing. NAQA introduced rubrics such as: #naqa\_suggests ([#naqa підказує](#)) which aims to answer difficult questions in an easy style; #naqa\_comments ([#naqa коментує](#)), sharing the posts of individual NAQA members describing their own opinions on certain issues; #naqa\_internationalisation ([#naqa інтернаціоналізація](#)) highlights achievements in the field of international cooperation; #naqa\_informs ([#naqa інформує](#)) about new normative rules or recommendations and important events. Finally, the #naqa\_advices ([#naqa радить](#)) rubric provides tips on resources that can be useful for self-development and self-education. In May 2020, a new project "NAQA School of Quality" was launched. It is a kind of platform for the exchange of best practices among HEIs. Under quarantine, events take place online, but in the future, it is planned to switch to an offline format.

All these activities are intended to support the stakeholders, to make them understand that they are not alone in these unprecedented times and that they will get answers and the help on the issues they cannot solve.



## ECAQA News

### Higher and Postgraduate Education in Kazakhstan: Accreditation Process under conditions of the pandemic

The pandemic has thrown education and healthcare systems off balance. A settled life in Kazakhstan has changed dramatically since March 2020, when all urban and rural activities slowed down during a 3-month lockdown. Transition to distance learning missed the mark, especially during the first days, since it had been necessary to set up websites, learn to use e-learning portals, upload a large amount of educational and instructional materials for students and teachers. Due to the forced transition to distance learning, it took just a few months for the higher education system to achieve the objectives, which were normally planned to be implemented in the coming years.

In healthcare professions education, the situation was double more complex as training of future medical doctors, pharmacists, public health officials, and epidemiologists requires a lot of practical activity at clinics, which had hastily switched to admitting patients with COVID-19 during the pandemic. Most teachers of clinical departments of medical HEIs and all residents came to the aid of practical healthcare and were helping in the "red zone" for many months. Interns became volunteers and rendered assistance to the most vulnerable population of the country by delivering food commodities, necessary personal supplies, taking care of seriously ill patients at the place of residence. The contribution of employees and residents of 9 medical



universities, Corporate Fund University Medical Centre of Nazarbayev University, Nazarbayev University School of Medicine and medical schools of major HEIs in Kazakhstan became a strong support for the healthcare system. Under ordinary conditions, residents receive training at 12 scientific centres and scientific research institutes in various fields of healthcare. During the state of emergency, senior medical students were working together with practicing physician and sometimes released them from the duty, especially for the first months of the pandemic, when doctors began to fall ill in large numbers. The positive side of the challenging circumstances was that interns and residents gained invaluable practical experience under conditions close to a military environment and developed critical thinking and decision-making skills in the absence of the treatment of new coronavirus infection, increased the level of independent work, responsibility, communication with colleagues, patients and the relatives.

The system of accreditation of educational organisations and programmes was locked down for several months. When the government had relaxed quarantine rules, the accreditation system switched to a hybrid mode of external evaluation of the quality of education. An example of application of this mode is the experience of The Eurasian Centre for Accreditation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Health Care/ECAQA (recognized by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan and internationally recognized and included on APQR).

ECAQA has developed and, since August 2020, has been applying the Interim recommendations for external evaluation of educational organisations and educational programmes, which provide for online participation of a foreign expert and offline participation of national academic experts, including



representatives of educational institutions, practical health care, and students. The main conditions for the peer review are the availability of electronic versions of the main documents of an educational organisation seeking accreditation, high-speed Internet for organising remote interviews with key persons of the organisation and representatives of stakeholders, compliance with safety measures during the pandemic and ensuring safety for members of the expert team. When developing an algorithm for the work of the External Evaluation Commission at an educational organisation seeking accreditation, the recommendations and existing practice of the accrediting agencies (ECAQA partners) were taken into consideration. The main criterion for the efficiency of performance of expert work is obtaining evidence (or missing evidence) that the activities of the educational organisation and educational programmes comply with the ECAQA standards for accreditation, developed on the basis of the WFME and ESG international standards for quality assurance.



## EPDAD News

### EPDAD and Accreditation of Teacher Training Programmes in the COVID 19 Pandemic Process



Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, one of the most important crises in human history our higher education system has been deeply affected as well as all areas of life. Distance education was introduced, interrupting face-to-face education in all institutions. Soon after Higher Education Council (YÖK), in Turkey announced that all programs would continue with distance education in the Spring semester of 2019-2020 academic year, EPDAD took the following decisions to adapt to the new situation caused by the crisis

1. A letter was sent to all stakeholders informing them about the current situation of the site visits: just one week before the interruption of education at universities due to the pandemic 20 of 24 institutions that were in the accreditation process received site visits and four of them were cancelled. 56 programmes were accredited.
2. The accreditation period of undergraduate programs, which are in the interim evaluation process, has been extended for one year to prevent loss of rights.
3. The transition to distance education in all higher education institutions has started studies on distance education accreditation, including the national quality institutions, as well as EPDAD, under the leadership of the Higher Education Quality Board (YÖKAK). EPDAD has established the Distance Education Accreditation Research and Development Commission to determine the principles and procedures for distance education accreditation. It is the responsibility of the accreditation agency to determine if, and under what conditions, it would perform virtual site visits during this temporary flexibility period.
4. Prior to this period, visits of the institutions that prepared the Self-Assessment reports and submitted them to EPDAD did not take place in the planned period. EPDAD is preparing a virtual visit process in order to continue the evaluation process of the institutions in this situation.
5. Suggestions are prepared for the virtual visit and stakeholders were asked to share their opinions in terms of understandability, applicability and usefulness, and to offer additional solutions if any, in terms of guidance during this period. Suggestions regarding the issues related to the virtual visit process of the faculties that have prepared the self-assessment report and submitted it to EPDAD are presented under the following headings:

The Faculties were asked to fill in Virtual Visit Acceptance (Consent) Form online to be accredited through virtual visits, to grant approvals regarding the data in this process, and to guarantee the operation of the application process at a high level.

Creating Virtual Visiting Calendar (Calendar Template): The virtual visit includes a one-day pre-visit of the head of the team and a visit calendar, which also includes other days with the accreditation assessment team. To this end, the virtual visit calendar will be a process that will be created by assigning roles and authorization to all relevant participants online. For this, a system running on Google Calendar style cloud can be created or it can be





done with a calendar application that can be uploaded on EPDAD's own web page.

### **Selection and Installation of Virtual Visiting Technologies**

To implement virtual visits, EPDAD will follow-up with in-person visits to meet the statutory and regulatory requirements to perform regular on-site inspections. Virtual site visits will rely on an engaged, interactive format (e.g., telephonic meetings, video conference calls, and the like), rather than solely document reviews or exchanges of emails.

Although videoconferencing systems are very diverse, their use may be preferred by some institutions or may be systematically blocked. For this reason, it can be requested to provide the username and password to the visiting team to take advantage of these opportunities by getting the opinion of the institution which platform is preferred. This method will eliminate many possible problems, especially the process of generating observational evidence.

Each institution creates its own data and takes a backup. It should be suggested that the data be stored in more than one place, and if possible, keep at least one copy on a portable memory, not over the Internet. In case the internet access is problematic, it should be suggested to make a plan B that can also transfer the data via portable memory or DVD recordings.

### **Guidelines were also prepared for the Self-Evaluation Report**

With the transition to distance education due to the pandemic for the faculties in the process of preparing the self-assessment report, the recommendations regarding the issues covering this period are presented below:

1. In addition to the teaching method, materials, measurement and evaluation tools specified for face-to-face teaching practices in the format of self-assessment report preparation,
  - a. Explanation of the teaching method, materials and assessment and evaluation tools used in the online teaching process during the pandemic period in the related headings (Ex: 1.4, 3.2),
  - b. Sharing information about the online activities carried out during the pandemic period during the explanations of the students' attendance to the lessons (Ex: 3.2),
  - c. Sharing information about platforms such as virtual laboratories and workshops, virtual classroom and learning management system used for students during the pandemic period (Ex: 5.1),
2. Explanation of the online support activities (seminar, live lesson, material sharing, announcement, technical support, etc.) carried out during the pandemic period in order to help the professional development of the teaching staff in terms of teaching and learning (Ex: 2.2),
3. On school experience and teaching practices during the pandemic period
  - a. explanation of the procedures and course processes with the justifications,
  - b. Submission of observation and evaluation forms for teacher candidates' teaching practices including micro teaching activities, if any,
  - c. Sharing assignments and reports prepared by prospective teachers,



d. disclosure of pandemic period-specific online sharing activities regarding the collaboration of the application coordinator and faculty at the faculty and the application coordinator at the school and the teacher,

4. Disclosure of online support and guidance services offered to students during the pandemic period (Ex: 3.3),

5. In the explanations on the use of library resources of the students, there are also guidance and support on access to online resources and library services during the pandemic period (Ex: 3.3, 5.1),

6. Explanation of the online communication processes, if any, with the management, teaching staff, students and other stakeholders during the pandemic period in the related headings (Ex: 6.3).

### **Determining team heads and visiting teams.**

Giving training to team heads and visiting teams about the virtual visit process and e-platform to be used. Ensuring that all relevant participants have access to the system and resources. For this, the e-platform user name and password are provided to the institution and visiting team for use in the virtual visit process.

Accreditation Preparation Training and e-platform training, including virtual visit process, to institution representatives and accreditation coordinators.

Creating a virtual visit schedule and schedule, scheduling videoconference sessions. For this, all participants are assigned to the role and an online virtual visit calendar is created, where the authorization is defined.

## **HEPDAK News**



### **Association for Evaluation and Accreditation of Nursing Education Programmes (HEPDAK) virtual training activities for the evaluators and institutions during the COVID Pandemic**

HEPDAK programme evaluators are required to participate in a training workshop before they start working as expert evaluators. These workshops are conducted to inform and train the programme evaluator candidates in the following areas: getting familiar with HEPDAK and accreditation process, building up evaluation skills, evaluator behaviour, evaluation report writing skills, and maintaining consistency between evaluations.

1. Considering with the prediction that the pandemic process will continue in the autumn term (2020-2021) and spring term (2021-2022), HEPDAK did not to interrupt the accreditation processes for nursing programmes. Instead, it organized **An Online Three Days Long Virtual Training Workshop for New Evaluators and the Experienced Active Evaluators On 10-12 August 2020** to prepare them for their role as virtual visitor and to orient them to the virtual site visit during accreditation processes. In total, 32 evaluators participated in this training.

The program included such topics as HEPDAK standards, virtual education standards, standards for the virtual site visit, preparation before virtual visit, writing evaluation report. The participants were divided into small groups and worked together on a scenario of a self-evaluation report of a nursing programme, discussed and presented their work on these subjects to whole group.





2. HEPDAK organized another **Online One Day Training Workshop for the Nursing Programme Institutions on 24 October 2020** to inform them about the accreditation process. The workshop programme included such topics as HEPDAK accreditation process, HEPDAK standards and the necessary evidences based on standards, HEPDAK virtual standards and virtual site visit, and how to prepare self-evaluation report. The participants worked interactively on a scenario of a self-evaluation report in groups and shared their study results by presenting to the audience (in total 64 participants). During these online workshops, the participants shared their experiences and they evaluated these training programs as satisfactory and found valuable.
3. Another activity that HEPDAK organized is **The Online Simulation Program To Orient The Evaluators who will perform virtual site visit and the representatives of the respective nursing programmes which will be visited**. This training was organized on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2020). This simulation covered the evaluator team members (the academics and the students) who will perform online site visit in December 2020 and the nursing programmes' representatives such as rector, deans, academics, students (Totally 26 evaluators, 5 students from 20 different institutions and 5 institutions' representatives). Evaluators were informed about virtual site visit standards and activities. During this simulation, the evaluator team members and the nursing programmes' representatives made a demonstration of role play related to their evaluation activities through virtual interviews and virtual observation of the nursing programme who applied for accreditation.

These activities were found to be successful and satisfactory by the attendants of the two sides. So these experiences could be recommended for the agencies if they are intending to make virtual site visit.



## News on Research in International Quality Assurance

### Digital Transformation in Quality Assurance and its Impact on Communication

Diane Freiberger & Tino Shahin (Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation)

#### Introduction & Communication in Virtual Environments

No matter if we wanted to or not, the last few months have taken us into the world of digital communication. The office with its employees and managers was suddenly 100% connected via Internet and was responsible for the company via various communication platforms. Day-to-day business, corporate decisions and work for the company all took place "remotely". Of course, the accreditation agencies were also confronted with this situation and it quickly became clear that the respective processes of the ongoing accreditation (respective certification) procedures could not suddenly come to a standstill.

A challenge was posed by the procedures, especially in connection with the on-site visits to the HEIs. On-site visits are the milestone in the accreditation procedures in which it is necessary to question the explanations of the self-evaluation reports more closely and personally on site, to enter into dialogue with the respective actors at the HEIs.

Thus, it was necessary to suddenly make this intensive "communication milestone" virtual, if one did not want to delay the procedure or postpone the upcoming accreditation.

"As soon as two or more actors get into contact with each other, they orientate themselves on the reactions - in other words, on the feedback of the other" (Dietrich 2020, p.1). "Digital communication does not share all the characteristics of analogue communication and vice versa" (Bauer/Müßle 2020, p. 12). The authors Bauer & Müßle also state that emoticons are not a full-fledged substitute for facial expressions, body language, timbre of the voice, frowning and laughing.

Dietrich's clear statement here is "A 'less' of direct contact must be compensated by a 'more' elsewhere." But what does this mean for the situation in the on-site visits? Here, the communication success factors listed by Dietrich should be transferred accordingly (see Dietrich 2020, p. 3).

- 1.) Over-prepare: This means that, as described in detail below, the on-site visit requires more intensive and detailed preparation from all sides, especially with regard to the peer review experts' list of questions for the interview partners at the HEIs.
- 2.) Over-act: The project managers must have good moderation skills and all information must be highlighted supportively, which can lead to a more pronounced feedback function.



- 3.) Over-view: "You can't not communicate" - this axiom of Watzlawick is not to be seen in remote mode in the same way as in personal conversation. There is no non-verbal communication. It is therefore important that there is a second project manager in the remote "on-site visit", who has exactly this "non-communicating" in mind and also does not overlook an occurring "side chat".
- 4.) Over-care: Getting to know each other personally through dialogue is one of the important aspects of the on-site visit. Watzlawick names this fact in his second axiom "Every communication has a content and relationship aspect" (Watzlawick et al. 2017).

### **The Higher Education Institution in the Ongoing Accreditation Process**

One of the biggest challenges for many HEIs is the required technology for digital on-site visits. Within the scope of preparing a digital on-site visit, it must be ensured that all relevant groups (HEI management, course management, teaching staff, quality management, administration and students) are available at the time and have access to the digital platform of the on-site visit. This naturally includes the organisation of office space if some of the HEI staff participates in the digital on-site visit from a common location.

From this it can already be concluded that personal resources are increased in many digital procedures. In some cases, even further investments (e.g. additional licenses for communication platforms) are necessary.

### **Accreditation Agencies and their Project Managers**

On behalf of their accreditation agency, the project manager is faced with the task of ensuring compliance with the legal requirements, guidelines and standards of the accreditation system, also in the context of digital on-site visits. The accreditation agencies have as a side effect of the digital transformation an increased internal need for training in building up online moderation competence (see above: "Over-act").

On the one hand, the demands on project managers in online moderation are higher, on the other hand, technical support of the project manager is necessary. The parallel content-related discussion and technical requirements can only be accomplished by two project managers and a technical service back up.

### **Peer Review Experts**

The digital transformation is opening new paths and can save certain resources. For peer-review-experts, digital procedures offer the advantage of being extremely time-saving.

But the switch to digital procedures can also be accompanied by an increased need for technical support. Since the preliminary discussion of subject matter on site is no longer carried out, the exchange within the expert panel is limited to a digital exchange or a telephone conference.

In general, the spontaneous element is omitted: With regard to the entire communication, spontaneous information that necessarily appears during a dialogue is lost. To compensate for this, two things are needed: First, intensive preparation and second, building a relationship between all participants, preferably in advance (see above: "Over-care").



### **Conclusion: An Approach to Successful Digital Transformation**

FIBAA's experience shows that the digital transformation through the implementation of digital on-site visits is certainly possible.

- 1.) A more intensive preparation time for coordination within the HEI, within the accreditation agency and within the expert panel must be expected (see above: "Over-prepare").
- 2.) Accreditation agencies have an increased internal need for training in building up online moderation competence (see above: "Over-act"). The training of the project manager for online moderation has a special role to play.
- 3.) This second project manager is also essential for the „Over-view“ (see above). Only a clear "Over-view" and good preparation can compensate for the limitation of communication (e.g. the loss of spontaneous elements).
- 4.) The limitation of communication must be compensated by the "Over-care". The more intensively all that involved exchange information beforehand, the better a personal relationship can be established.

On the basis of all aspects mentioned, it can be stated that digital on-site visits are possible, but only if the procedure is adapted to digital conditions.

The detailed article and the quoted sources can be found [here](#).

## **Fostering Independence of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education Arena**

By Maja Milas, Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency

### ***The rationale of the project***

The context of this article and its findings are grounded in the activities of the project of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency (SQAA) focusing on exploring independence of quality assurance agencies in higher education from different national and European environments.

The project is contextualised with a focus on exploring the role of the agencies in different backgrounds, analysing differences and commonalities between different parts of Europe and evaluating the responsibilities of key actors in different procedures at the agency level.

From a system point of view, it seems difficult to consider academic freedom and institutional autonomy of higher education institutions without considering the role of quality assurance agencies. The quality of higher education emerged as an increasingly regulated area, where countries generally shifted away from direct control of centralized institutions, but still remained a strong influence. Especially challenging and concerning is the interference of government on the work and functioning of the quality assurance agencies.

In public debates and in formal procedures, the aspect of independence is being addressed in different perspectives, especially in the context that procedures and decisions are based on expertise. Obligations to establish independent public or private quality assurance agency are inspired by considerations of credibility, integrity, professionalism and trustworthiness.



These obligations are important in ensuring students, teachers and higher education institutions that expertise plays a decisive role in the decision-making process.

### ***Methodology for analysing independence of quality assurance agencies***

Within this project, we developed a methodology for analysing independence of quality assurance agencies. The focus of our research relies on the five main categories of independence:

1. The appointment of chief executive of the quality assurance agency,
2. The process of preparing and adopting criteria / standards for accreditation and evaluation procedures,
3. The appointment of experts for accreditation and evaluation procedures,
4. The decision-making procedures on the accreditation and evaluation procedures and
5. The appeal procedures for the accreditation and evaluation procedures.

As a method of collecting the information about the independence of the quality assurance agencies we use open-ended questionnaires, based on these five main quality indicators. In the process of collecting data we determined the scale for each criterion - 1 being the most independent, which means that none of the relevant stakeholders has a predominant influence and 4 being the least independent, meaning that relevant stakeholders have a predominant influence on the functioning of the quality assurance.

Rating scale		Third party influence.
Compliant	Independent	None of the stakeholders has a strong influence
Substantially compliant	Mostly independent	Stakeholders have certain influences
Partially compliant	Partially independent	Stakeholders have a strong, indirectly predominant influence
Non-compliant	Dependant	Stakeholders have a strong and predominant influence

*Criterion scale*

### ***Findings of the survey***

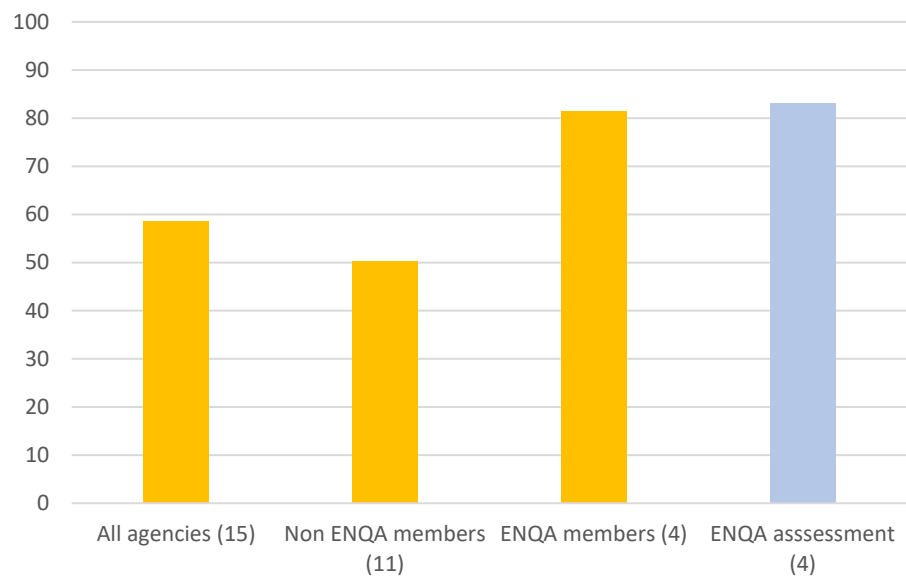
We complemented the outcomes of the survey from the open-ended questionnaires with findings of the examination of other relevant documents, such as regulations on accreditations and evaluations and self-evaluation reports of quality assurance agencies. In the sample of agencies, that are members of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), we also analysed ENQA reports. Specifically, we analysed the 3. 3. standard of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), which



refers to the independence of quality assurance agencies. In addition, we took a look at the general status of the quality assurance agency, connected to legal status, organisation and background.

Until now, we have qualitatively and quantitatively analysed the questionnaires of 15 quality assurance agencies. 4 out of 15 agencies, which were included in the sample, are members of ENQA and 11 out of 15 agencies are not its members. In quantitative terms, a total average or independence indicator for all agencies included in the analysis is 59. More precisely, the overall independence indicator of non-ENQA members is 50, while the independence indicator for ENQA members is a total of 81. The analysis revealed that non-ENQA members due to different political, social and historical reasons, are less independent and autonomous than agencies, that are ENQA members. Within the ENQA members, included in the sample, we further analysed and compared our scores with the findings of the ENQA panel. The average or independence indicator, deducted from ENQA reports, is 83, which is slightly higher than the result of our analysis, which is 81.

### Cumulative values



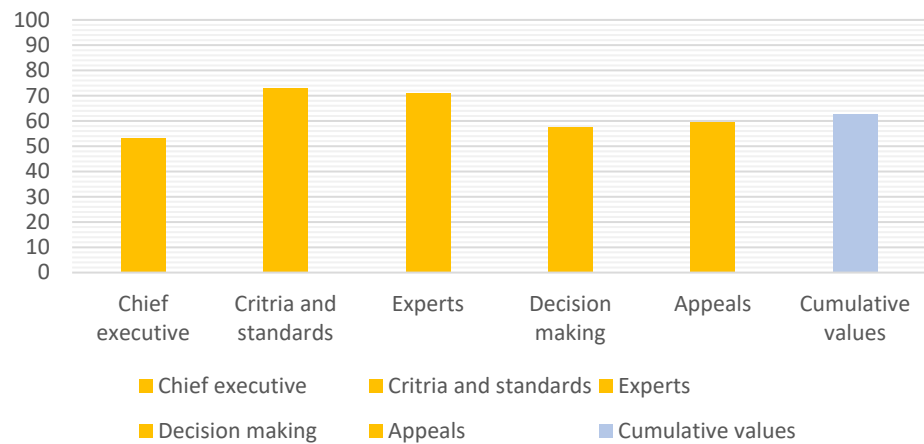
### Cumulative survey values

In qualitative terms, the analysis of each of the five categories showed that on a general level quality assurance agencies have mostly established formal mechanisms to safeguard operations and outcomes of those operations without third party influence. The analysis also showed that the influences from ministries or other political entities have diminished and that agencies have strengthened its operational and organisational capacities in last years. On the other hand, the analysis displayed there is still a great deal of indirect influence of third parties on the work of quality assurance agencies. It must be noted, however, that agencies pointed out the biggest threat for independence is coming from ministries and other political entities. Other stakeholders, the universities, the representatives of the labour maker, the students' organisations or other relevant higher education stakeholders are not being mentioned in that manner.



The results of the analysis exhibit that autonomy of agencies is most impaired in decision-making procedures and the process of appointment of the chief executive of the agency. Surprisingly, ENQA members pointed out bigger weaknesses in appeal procedures whether because of the unclear appeal procedures whether because of the power of decision making in appeal procedures, however the sample (4) is too small to make conclusions.

## Quality Assurance Agencies ENQA and non-ENQA members



### *QAA criterion per category*

In the process of appointment of the chief executive, the governmental influence is manifested mainly through the direct governmental appointment of the chief executive or the indirect appointment of the chief executive by the collective body (i.e. the majority of board members, who appoint a chief executive are nominated by the government). The indirect governmental influence, connected to the constitution of the collective body is seen also in the procedure of appointing experts, appeal committee members or in decision-making procedures. In the decision-making process, the level of autonomy is further demonstrated by the decision-making power, in particular by the fact whether the agency has the final call for appointment (i.e. the agency's competence to make final decisions in compression to merely adopt recommendations). The impact from the government can be further seen by the possibilities of external influence on the procedures, for example by initiating an extraordinary evaluation or granting licenses / accreditation for higher vocational colleges despite the quality has been assessed negatively by agencies. In appeal procedures, third party influence can be visible mostly by the power to ignore the agencies negative accreditation decision or unclear rules of appeal procedures in so-called grey areas, which leaves room for possible influences. Alongside, the composition of the appeal committee (i.e. 2 out of 3 members are appointed by the government) in some agencies suggests there is a strong indirect governmental influence or even worse direct influence, where the second-instance body is established by the government.

### *Further steps*





The findings of our survey highlighted the need to further foster the organisations operational autonomy and autonomy of formal outcomes, especially in regards to indirect influences of the government in different processes at the quality assurance agencies.

In the second stage of the project, we plan to extend and upgrade the qualitative analysis of possible influences of external stakeholders on the work of quality assurance agencies by including wider sample of quality assurance agencies from different countries.

As a final outcome, we will prepare useful guidelines and information on different aspects of the functioning of quality agencies according to the level of autonomy, covering the areas which are vital for the successful quality provision and learning environments in higher education. This can be useful on a general level to build trust among different stakeholders and also in a practical sense – to foster the quality of internal evaluation procedures, conducted by ENQA, EQAR, ECA or other relevant organisations, working in the field of higher education.

### **Conclusions**

This preliminary analysis shows a great diversity of quality assurance agencies across Europe. We believe further work is needed to identify common problems, exchange examples of good practices and propose relevant solutions. Well-performing quality assurance agencies will equalize quality standards and constitute activities to fully support higher education systems and consequently fulfil expectations of teachers and students in an increasingly diversified European environment.

### **Thematic analysis of the quality of distance learning during the pandemic**

The Agency for Higher Education of the Republic of Srpska (AHERS) presented the results of the "The thematic analysis of the process of distance learning during the extraordinary circumstances caused by the occurrence of the corona virus" at a bi-monthly meeting of the Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education – (CEENQA) held on November 17, 2020. This was the second in a series of bi-monthly online meetings of representatives of network member agencies that have been held regularly since September 2020. The second meeting was dedicated to the work of agencies and higher education institutions during the pandemic.

The thematic analysis on the quality of work of higher education institutions during the online semester in the previous academic year under the circumstances caused by the pandemic of corona virus was presented by Duška Radmanović, Head of the Department for Quality Assurance and International Cooperation. She explained that the thematic analysis included two surveys within the Agency's information system, one completed by academic staff and the other completed by students. The sample of teachers and students who completed the surveys prepared for the purpose of analysis is very high (419 teachers and 552 students) when taking into account the total number of teaching staff and students in the higher education system of Republika Srpska. The survey was completed by



teachers and students from 146 study programs from 14 higher education institutions.

Presenting the analysis, Radmanović emphasized that it was determined that the institutions reacted very efficiently when switching to online classes, and that the vast majority of teachers (more than 99%) organized online classes.

The analysis shows that students were generally satisfied with the work of their teachers during the distance learning, which is confirmed by the fact that students rated the work of their teachers higher than their own work and commitment.

The analysis of the students' answers also concludes that most of them maintained regular communication with the teachers, and that they were informed about their obligations in time.

Radmanović also pointed out the differences in the implementation of teaching related to the scientific field to which the study programs belong, since most of the comments when it comes to obstacles that are not technical in nature, are directed to difficulties in implementing certain types of teaching such as, for example, laboratory work.

Despite the satisfaction with the quality of the distance learning process, the teaching staff and students answered that they prefer the classic way of teaching, and the students emphasized that during the online teaching they mostly lacked personal contact with both teachers and fellow students.

However, both students and teaching staff believe that online teaching can be used as an auxiliary mechanism in the regular teaching process, especially in the second and third cycle of studies.

Having in mind the analysis of all answers collected in the surveys, Radmanović announced the recommendations that the Agency will send to higher education institutions, which will be an integral part of the overall thematic analysis.

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<b>CEENQA e.V.</b> c/o ASIIN e.V. Mörsenbroicher Weg 200 40470 Düsseldorf	Represented by Franci Demsar, Martina Vidlakova  Register entry Vereinsregister (Association Register) Register Number: VR 10561 Register Court: Amtsgericht Düsseldorf	Contact Information Telephone: +49 211 900 977 20  E-Mail: <a href="mailto:secretariat@ceenqa.org">secretariat@ceenqa.org</a>  Internet address: <a href="https://www.ceenqa.org">https://www.ceenqa.org</a>
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