

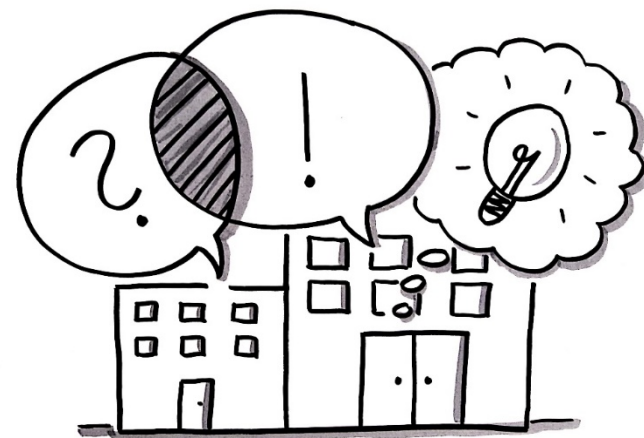


Agentur für  
Qualitätssicherung  
und Akkreditierung  
Austria

# Virtual site-visits at Higher Education Institutions: *creativity, trust and other quality assurance issues*

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# Site-visits

# Site-visits

- If one of the central tasks of the external QA is to enhance trust within EHEA, then site-visit is one part of the trust-building (Szabo & Tück 2018) path of it
- Trust is a crucial aspect of any quality assurance system and process (Stensaker & Maassen 2015, Yingqiang & Yongjian 2016)
- Site-visits are a crucial part of the quality assurance procedures
- Site-visit as a central event in the peer-review based external quality assurance procedures as well as ESG 2015 requirement

# Site-visits

Functions of the site-visit: *Getting to know how the HEI works*

- AQ Austria: verification of written information, filling knowledge gaps, clarifying open questions, no *tribunal*
- Peers meet peers at the HEI: expert group visits HEI accompanied by AQ Austria representatives
- Duration 1 to 3 days

→ Trust becomes a critical asset for organisations in overcoming periods of crisis and uncertainty (Mishra 1996, Tyler 2003) and coping with over-complexities and uncertainties (Enders 2013)

# Shift to the online format: virtual site-visit

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Change of circumstances since March 2020:

- Need to explore challenges, adapt to change by maintaining quality and integrity to the peer review

→ *3<sup>rd</sup> round of institutional accreditations by AQ Austria; programme accreditations, etc.*

- Almost no postponing of accreditation procedures at AQ Austria

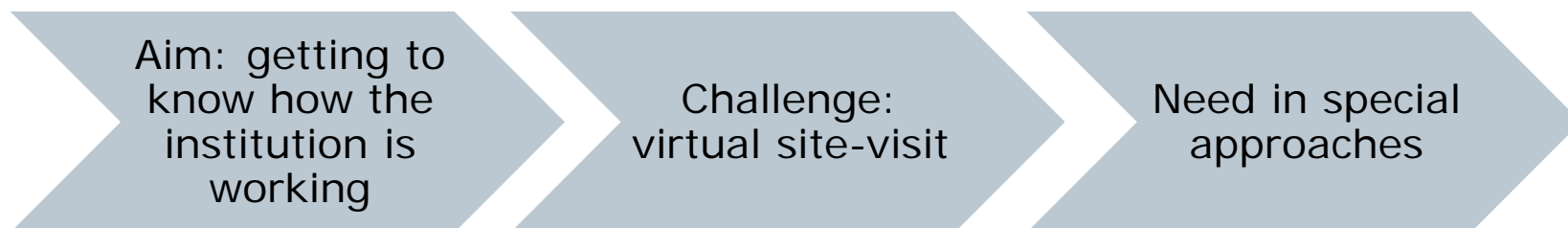
→ *continuing under circumstances of high uncertainty*

- Increase of experimenting with formats and structures

→ *new additional procedural steps*



## From *standard* to *special*





# Virtual site-visit

# Virtual site-visit

- Virtual site-visit takes place online and needs to maintain but adapt crucial elements of the physical site-visits to the online format:
  - Time-management: time-slots to enter and leave the virtual meeting room
  - Special communication rules: how to start and finish
  - Specific chairman task: more effort to the organizational part of the contributions and comments (spoken, written in the chat, etc.)
  - Check-list with questions and issues: availability of people and
  - Visitation of the premises: ???

# Virtual site-visit

- Trust is a crucial aspect of any quality assurance system and process (Stensaker & Maassen 2015, Yingqiang & Yongjian 2016)
- Screening of pre-recorded videos: presenting infrastructure, reserach and/or artistic projects of a HEI
- Autonomy/creativity of the HEI: the concept and content of the video material, but suggestions by expert panel possible
- Screening and discussion: integradted into the structure of the site-visit



# Virtual visitation of the premises

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- HEI provides a video (max. 1 hour, prepared in advance)
- Aim of the video is to demonstrate the premises (seminar rooms, laboratories, etc.) and the artistic- and scientific projects as well as other content/aspects of the HEI
- Video reflects on topics according to the special demand of the quality assurance procedure, the HEI and the expert panel members
- Viewing integrated into the virtual site-visit → workload of the expert panel
- Site-visit schedule foresees different rounds for discussion with relevant members of the HEI

# Virtual visitation of the premises

- Video material allows experts to get an insight into the institution and especially into:
  - its creative/artistic profile and/or teaching/research infrastructure
  - other chosen profile demonstration → creativity & responsibility of the HEI
  - video works: complementary and in addition to accreditation criteria and written self-documentation
  - special task to assure the *element of atmospheric impression* of the site-visit in online format

# Two examples from virtual site-visits



# Musik und Kunst Privatuniversität Wien – April 2021

- Procedure: extension of the institutional accreditation
- 4th cycle of re-accreditation
- Thematic focus & length:
  1. Welcoming words of the rector and music performed by students, 4'' 29''
  2. Premises of the HEI, 20''50'''
  3. Scientific and artistic research at the HEI: presentations of selected projects, 6''34'''
  4. Artistic projects of the HEI: presentation of selected projects, 19''25'''

# Katholische Privatuniversität Linz – September 2021

- Procedure: extension of the institutional accreditation
- 5th cycle of re-accreditation
- Thematic focus & length:
  1. Welcoming words, short portrait, infrastructure, student union, etc. 44''10''

# Thoughts and lessons: reflection and potential

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- Principles of the agency say:
  - Higher education institutions are autonomous, have main responsibility for quality
  - External quality assurance is necessity, added value & aims at quality development
  - Cooperation = communication & reliability

→ QA Agency needs to trust the institutions in order to build (public) trust in these institutions (Abebe 2021)

→ ...and trust holds a central place in higher education, higher education institutions and quality assurance (Stensaker & Grodnitzka 2009, Yingqiang & Yongjian 2016, Zalec 2013)

# Thoughts and Lessons: reflection and potential

- Feedback of the HEIs:
  - openness and excitement towards creative formats
- Expert panel feedback:
  - very positive feedback; good method for the circumstances; underlines individuality of HEI
- Reflections of the secretariat:
  - online procedures require strict organization and even clearer communication; less flexible; preparation; improvisation during unprecedented (technical) situations
  - possibility for creativity, but need consolidation after time
  - issues of trust arise – direct vs. virtual communication/ videos
  - efficiency of site-visit

# Thoughts and Lessons: reflection and potential

- Experience so far: 2 years of institutional accreditations → videos due to pandemic
- Lessons:
  - method should not be limited to a certain type of HEI or procedure
  - or (just) the format of the virtual site-visit → the created videos can save time during real site-visits
  - on a long run: need of standards and guidelines

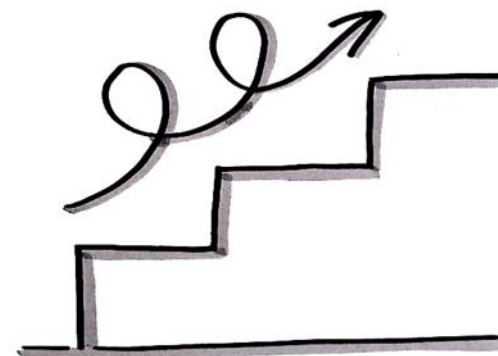
→ Trust is an important mechanism for proper functioning of higher education institutions and their interaction with stakeholders and is indispensable for a long-lasting relationship between them (Abebe 2021)

# Thoughts and Lessons: reflection and potential

- Potential:
  - involvement and visibility of different academic and non-academic groups of the HEI in the review process
  - transferability of the format to real site-visits
  - adaptability to the needs of various disciplines and peer-review processes → flexible in time, content and form of presentation
  - potential to present relevant information in different formats, by increasing the variety of material (not only written self-evaluation and excel sheets)

# Thoughts and Lessons: reflection and potential

- Potential:
  - standards for video material: creativity vs. comparability
  - instead of travel costs – video production budget
  - room for cooperation between different HEIs in video production, also student involvement
  - video material can be (re-)used by the HEI for multiple purposes: marketing, visibility etc.
  - production-expenses and time can be converted in student projects or done in cooperation

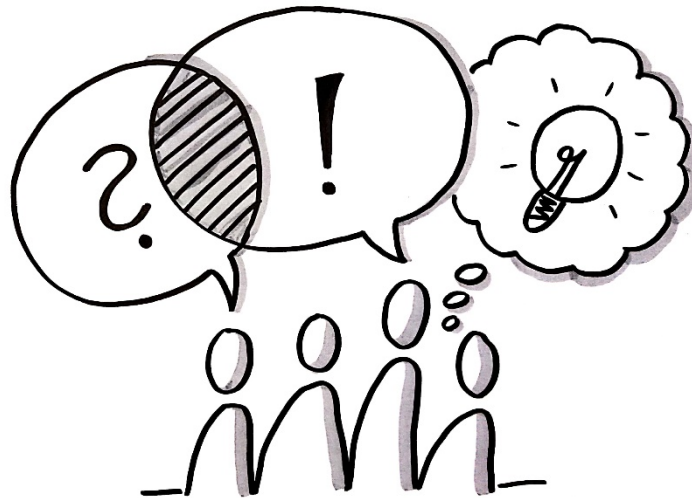




# Thank you!

For further questions, suggestions, interaction –

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