

ENQA report to the BFUG, 24-25 September 2020, Berlin

Highlights of ENQA's activities since March 2020

The Covid-19 pandemic has had an important impact on the activities of ENQA since March 2020, impacting our statutory meetings, events for members and other stakeholders, as well as our review process. This report provides an update on how ENQA has adjusted its work during this time, and how the situation may impact our work in the months to come.

I. ENQA's new Strategic Plan 2021-2025 and statutory issues

The ENQA 2020 spring General Assembly meeting (the "Members' Forum") took place online on 29 April 2020. On this occasion, the Assembly adopted a new strategic plan for ENQA for 2021-2025. The strategic plan repositions ENQA as a membership organisation with the primary purpose of supporting its members: in policy making processes, in developing their own quality assurance in line with the requirements of the ESG, as well as in sharing good practice to take European quality assurance forward to meet the needs of the changing higher education landscape. The external reviews of agencies remain an important part of ENQA's work. However, as a membership organisation, ENQA does not consider itself as a "gatekeeper" of agencies.

ENQA's members have decided, through an online vote, to extend the terms of office of the current Board until April 2021 (rather than October 2020), in the hope that a face-to-face meeting may be possible at that time. In the meantime, the General Assembly meeting of October 2020 will be held online and will only deal with the most urgent statutory issues.

2. E4 statement on the use and relevance of the ESG

The E4 organisations have published at the end of August a joint statement on the use of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) in the changing landscape of higher education.

In recent years higher education provision has been changing rapidly, including the mainstreaming of e-learning, the emergence of micro-credentials, the launch of the European Universities Initiative, and the renewed importance of the third mission of higher education institutions. Furthermore, some higher education institutions and systems are exploring ways to approach quality assurance that go beyond the ESG.

The statement was prepared in response to discussions regarding the continued relevance and applicability of the ESG in this changing context. It covers issues such as the purpose, focus and interpretation of the ESG. The E4 Group underline in the statement that the **appropriate and flexible use and interpretation of the ESG are at the core of their suitability to respond to the developing higher education landscape** and support innovation and diversity in higher education and quality assurance. The E4 Group believes that the ESG **remain valid and relevant in the current higher education landscape**.

ENQA, as the other E4 are committed to a continuous dialogue with their respective constituencies about the needs and expectations of the sector, so that any discussion on future revision is informed by evidence drawn from the full range of stakeholders and achieved in a way that maintains consensus across the EHEA.

The full statement is available [here](#).

3. Adjustment of review processes to online mode

ENQA and its member agencies have had to adjust their review methods to the current situation in the past few months. While each agency adopts a different approach in line with its national requirements and expectations, the main trend has been that in the initial phase agencies were principally postponing review processes, as the expectation was that physical site visits could resume reasonably fast. However, as the travel restrictions now persist, many agencies have opted to carry out site visits online instead. This is considered important in order not to leave programmes and institutions in an accreditation gap, and to maintain trust in the system in the national context and internationally. Some agencies have opted for a mixed approach, postponing larger or more complex and comprehensive reviews, such as institutional assessments, or initial accreditation processes, and moving other reviews, such as programme accreditations or follow-up processes online. Sometime the meetings themselves are hybrid, with some participants meeting in the same location, while others connect via web tools. Some agencies have faced complications related to the legal context on issues such as conditions for prolongation of accreditation, or simply rules regarding the meetings of accreditation commissions, or review panels, for which no provision exists for online alternatives. In

many countries the agencies have engaged in a dialogue with national authorities to reach solutions fast, to support the sector which is finding itself in a particularly challenging situation.

ENQA itself has followed a similar pattern in agency reviews: initially reviews were postponed, but currently priority is given to maintaining the regular review schedule holding site visits online if needed. The agencies and experts have reacted very well to the situation. ENQA has prepared additional guidelines for online visits, to ensure that they meet all the requirements a regular site visit would need to meet. An online visit is not – and should not be considered to be – a second class review. Indeed, the experience so far has shown that they require at least as much preparation as physical site visit and can yield excellent results with the engagement of dedicated review experts.

The current situation has forced agencies and ENQA to think about review processes post-Covid-19, and while it is too early to have a clear picture of the trends, it seems plausible to assume that in the future some kind of hybrid approaches, using a mixture of online and face-to-face elements will be the way forward. ENQA is planning to carry out an analysis of the move to online reviews over the coming winter and will inform the BFUG of its outcomes in due course.