QAA International Partners' Forum - 20 May 2020 Summary Report

Executive summary

QAA's International Partners' Forum hosted on 20 May 2020, highlighted the common challenges to higher education quality assurance across the world brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Higher education institutions from the 22 countries represented in the Forum have responded to the need to keep students and staff safe, while continuing to deliver the higher education their societies and economies need. They have done this primarily by moving to large-scale digital delivery, which has in turn presented its own problems. Readiness, capacity and expertise for this move has been inconsistent across the higher education sector of most countries. For several, limited technology, including connectivity and access to digital platforms, has been a major issue; and restrictions on student and staff mobility requires a rethinking of business models. In some cases, provider financial sustainability is threatened.

The pandemic has presented regulatory/external quality assurance (EQA) agencies with the challenge of delivering their mandate in the face of rapid change and continuing uncertainty. Agencies have been innovative in their responses, listening to the needs of higher education institutions in their sector, and collaborating closely in their strategies. They have provided advice and guidance on quality-related issues for digital delivery, been flexible in their approaches and methodologies for regulation and EQA, and adopted innovations such as virtual site visits.

Importantly, agencies recognise that, even where their standards cover digital delivery, they need to have more detailed guidelines and methodologies to specifically address quality and assessment of digital provision.

One of the greatest challenges is in relation to the provision of work-based learning, and clinical and practical placements. Agencies have worked with their higher education sectors, and, where they have a role, professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, to set up alternative arrangements to meet practical and clinical requirements.

All Forum participants are expecting some degree of change in both the higher education sector in their country and in their own approach to regulation/EQA lasting beyond the current circumstances. There was consensus that the expansion of digital delivery would continue, and that there was an opportunity to embed effective practice and address some recurring issues with digital delivery. Some agencies anticipate that the provision of shorter courses, microcredentials, and segments of programmes will remain as a core part of the offer from higher education institutions. All agree that they will continue the collaborative and cooperative approach being taken to address challenges in their jurisdiction. A number of innovations in regulatory/EQA processes that have been tested and refined, will be adopted as standard procedure going forward.

Introduction

Global higher education has adapted rapidly in response to the impact of COVID-19. In many jurisdictions, governments, regulators, quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions (HEIs) are rethinking and refocusing their approaches so that they can deliver education in a way that is safe for staff and students, maintains quality, is sustainable and is resilient to future shocks.

To explore some of these approaches through the lens of higher education quality assurance, the QAA International Partners' Forum (the Forum) brought together over 50 colleagues from quality assurance agencies in Africa, Asia, Australia and Europe, representing 27 organisations (a full list of participants can be found at Annex 1).

The Forum was an opportunity to share effective practice, experiences and ideas about the current challenges facing higher education globally; look forward to the post COVID-19 landscape; and explore what this will mean for standards and the quality assurance of higher education.

Ahead of the Forum, QAA distributed a questionnaire to participants, seeking information on the key challenges they and HEIs in their country were facing, their responses, and their views about the future. A summary of the responses to the questionnaire can be found at Annex 2. During the Forum, participants heard presentations on these questions directly from 10 agencies - summaries of the presentations are at Annex 3.

While each sector and agency have their own unique operating environment, remit and responsibilities, the commonality of challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic - and responses to these challenges - are striking. This paper explores the dominant and cross-cutting themes that emerged from the Forum.

Impact on higher education institutions

Nearly all agencies reported that the pandemic had impacted on HEIs in their country. Several highlighted that restrictions on student mobility would have a negative effect on institutions that enrolled international students, leading to a rethinking of business models in many cases and, in some, threats to financial sustainability. Mobility of staff was also identified as an issue in countries where the branch campus model, with staff moving between campuses, is common. HEIs using this model have had to rethink their operational approach.

In almost every country, HEI campuses have been closed, and institutions have been forced to adopt alternative forms of delivery to on-site, in-person methods. This has led to a significant, often rapid, expansion of distance education, mostly via digital delivery. All agencies identified that readiness, capacity and expertise for this move has been inconsistent across their country's higher education sector. One commented that 'neither teachers nor students were ready for it'. Many institutions are having to invest in staff development to increase expertise in teaching and learning for digital delivery.

For several agencies, technology, including connectivity and access to digital platforms, has been a major issue, for instance, where 'campus closures and the move to digital delivery has highlighted a significant infrastructure deficit, in relation to both students and HEIs'. To address these infrastructure challenges, several jurisdictions have, or are going to, conduct needs analysis to identify where and what improvements need to be made, to inform policy and investment decisions.

Impact on the student experience

A number of agencies emphasised that many students are 'tech savvy' and so are welcoming of quality digital delivery. However, most also noted that access to the necessary technology, including connectivity was not consistent across their country and their population, with 'digital poverty' remaining an issue. It was generally felt that engagement, between institution and student, and between students themselves was an area that required further development in the digital delivery environment. One agency noted that 'most of this year's freshmen……have never met either with each other in their classes or even with their teacher'.

Increasing numbers of higher education programmes have work-based learning components, and clinical and practical placements are essential to professional courses. In at least one agency's jurisdiction, 'industry experience' is mandatory in all courses. Students have every right to expect that relevant practical elements will be part of their experience. All participants identified this as a critical issue, that they are working to address (more discussion of approaches is below).

The pandemic's economic impact is being felt by students. In several countries, students work alongside their study to support themselves, while others rely on family support. In both cases, workplace closures and business downturns mean, to quote one participant: 'A substantial portion of students are financially in trouble'. A number of agencies are working with their sector and governments to put support measures in place for students affected in this way.

Impact on agencies and their responses

Broadly, the pandemic has presented agencies with the challenge of delivering their regulatory or external quality assurance (EQA) mandate in the face of rapid change and continuing uncertainty. The issues identified above for HEIs and students, are all integral to maintaining quality so agencies have an interest in addressing them and finding solutions. One way that a number are doing this is by developing advice and guidance for the sector on quality-related issues for digital delivery, including:

- pedagogy and course design
- admissions
- assessment and academic integrity
- student engagement
- work integrated learning and clinical experience
- quality assurance of transnational education (TNE).

In each case, development of advice and guidance has been characterised by collaboration with the country's higher education sector, drawing on expertise and experience in institutions. It has also been informed by effective practice sharing between agencies. Several jurisdictions have developed and adopted principles that both the agency and HEIs undertake to adhere to in the maintenance of quality during this period of rapid change.

Perhaps the most dominant theme to emerge from the Forum was that agencies have all recognised the need for flexibility in their approaches and methodologies for regulation and EQA - as one agency said: 'changing reality calls for new forms of external quality assurance'. However, flexibility needs to be balanced with the imperative of maintaining standards and quality. To determine how best to achieve this balance, agencies have listened to the needs of HEIs in their sector, sometimes conducting extensive consultations.

Strategies agencies have employed include:

- postponing/putting on hold regulatory/EQA processes - some agencies have offered this as an option to HEIs, with most taking up the option
- easing change-reporting requirements - for example, it is a common requirement for HEIs to report significant changes in delivery arrangements, and these have been waived temporarily in most jurisdictions
- modifying regulations - in some countries, specific approval is needed for digital delivery, and this has been relaxed to enable institutions to move quickly to this format
- adopting flexible interpretations and applications of standards and criteria
- 'virtual' review approaches - nearly all agencies have developed and introduced virtual components to their review processes. This encompasses preparatory work, analysis and discussion at the start of reviews; use of digital technologies for panel meetings; and virtual site visits. These approaches have been generally well received by HEIs, reviewers and stakeholders alike, but agencies that have piloted them extensively advise that there has to be mutual agreement, support and readiness for them to be successful.

Most agency standards cover digital delivery but, recognising the wider move across the world, most are rethinking their approach and, in some cases, are developing guidelines and methodologies to specifically address quality and assessment of digital provision. Many note that this will also require training and upskilling of agency staff and reviewers.

Like HEI campuses, many agency offices have been closed, with staff working virtually. Changes to review schedules, the focus on advice and guidance, and the development and implementation of revised or new methodologies have all presented operational challenges on top of dealing with what is, in many cases, a new way of working. Nonetheless, as one agency reflects, shifting workloads has afforded them the time for other activities, such as reviewing manuals and guidelines, and piloting new processes.

Agencies have recognised the need for open and comprehensive communication with all stakeholders, including HEIs, students and the broader public. Most reported that they have put in place communication strategies to promulgate their advice and guidance, advise of changes in their approaches and methodologies, and broadly provide assurances that quality and standards are being maintained.

As mentioned above, work-based learning, and clinical and practical placements are essential elements of many courses and critical to programmes leading to professional registration. In many jurisdictions, there are professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) governing professional accreditation and registration, that have strict requirements for clinical and practical experience. Agencies in these jurisdictions have been working with professional bodies and HEIs to set up alternative arrangements to meet practical and clinical requirements. These include alternative assessment arrangements; allowing entry to the workforce with less work-based experience than originally planned, with further support in the first year; and giving students the opportunity to continue working on certain competencies into their first year of employment.

International reviewers/experts

The use of international reviewers and experts in EQA processes is recognised as effective practice and is a requirement under such frameworks as the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESGs). Several jurisdictions make extensive use of international reviewers in their processes and, with restrictions on international mobility likely to continue for some time, have had to make arrangements to

maintain international input, and access to expertise more broadly. One participant observed that 'involving international external reviewers may be difficult to guarantee in the future'. Others are focusing on recruiting and training more local reviewers and using digital technologies to involve international experts virtually. This is an area where cooperation between agencies can be effective to share expertise, for example, through access to reviewer pools.

The 'new normal'

Both the pre-event questionnaire and the presentations at the Forum explored whether the changes in a country's higher education sector and in agency practices and approach, brought about by need, could be adopted in the longer term, representing a 'new normal'. Notably, all Forum participants said 'yes', expecting some degree of change in both the higher education sector and in their approach to regulation/EQA lasting beyond the current circumstances.

First and foremost, there was consensus that the expansion of digital delivery would continue. While some institutions would revert to mainly on-campus delivery, there would be a significant increase in the current level of digital delivery. Agencies noted that their current focus, and that of institutions, on quality digital delivery presented an opportunity to embed effective practice and address some recurring issues such as low progression and completion and high attrition rates. Most agencies were optimistic that the work being done in their country to address infrastructure and access to technology issues would support the increase in digital delivery.

Some agencies saw more fundamental changes in the nature of higher education emerging during the pandemic that could endure as features. Governments were asking higher education to play a key role in their country's recovery from the pandemic, including reskilling and upskilling the workforce, and building in more responsiveness and resilience. The provision of shorter courses and microcredentials currently being supported by some governments was likely to remain as a core part of HEI offerings, in the view of some agencies. Agencies recognised that quality assurance and regulatory frameworks would need to adapt to ensure their quality.

Input and discussion at the Forum often highlighted the collaborative and cooperative approach being taken to address challenges in the different jurisdictions - between the agency and HEI, other agencies and government departments, and other regulators and quality assurance bodies including PSRBs. There was a strong sense among agencies that this would continue. For example, one agency is working to empower professional accreditation bodies to undertake all programme accreditation in relevant areas, thereby streamlining the regulatory framework.

Finally, all agencies have responded very positively to the need for flexibility in their regulatory/EQA approaches. The innovations highlighted above are being tested and refined, and agencies have indicated that they will adopt many as standard procedure going forward. This will be of benefit to HEIs as, in the main, the changes will be less burdensome, and more effective. As one agency found after trialling virtual site visits - they provide better access to external stakeholders, reviewers have been confident and rigorous, and they are 15% cheaper than on-site visits.

Conclusion

QAA's International Partner Forum highlighted the common challenges to higher education quality assurance across the world brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the long-term

change likely to arise from it and the deep collaboration across higher education sectors globally that has arisen from the crisis.

Higher education institutions in the 22 countries represented in the Forum have responded to social and physical distancing restrictions by moving to large-scale digital delivery. This has presented issues relating to inconsistent readiness, capacity and expertise for digital delivery; limitations on technology and access across most countries' higher education sectors; and, in some cases, a rethinking of business models.

Regulatory/EQA agencies have been innovative in their responses to the pandemic challenges, listening to the needs of HEIs and collaborating with them in their strategies. They have provided advice and guidance on quality-related issues for digital delivery, been flexible in their approaches and methodologies for regulation and EQA, and adopted new innovations such as virtual site visits. They have amended or added to their standards and methodologies where needed, to specifically address quality and assessment of digital provision.

Agencies have worked with their higher education sectors and, where they have a role, PSRBs to set up alternative arrangements to meet practical and clinical placement requirements.

All Forum participants are expecting some degree of lasting change in both the higher education sector in their country and in their approach to regulation/EQA. They expect the expansion of digital delivery to continue, presenting an opportunity to embed effective practice and address some recurring issues with digital delivery. Some agencies anticipate that the provision of shorter courses, microcredentials and segments of programmes will remain a core part of HEI offerings. All agree that they will continue the collaborative and cooperative approach being taken to address challenges in their jurisdiction. A number of innovations in regulatory/EQA processes will be adopted as standard procedure going forward.

All these changes and innovations will benefit HEIs and students, assuring the quality of higher education during and post-pandemic, and being responsive to change without unnecessary regulatory impediments or additional burden.

Annex 1: Participants

Country/ Region	Organisation		Job title		First name	Last name
Australia	Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency	TEQSA	International and Industry Professional Bodies Manager	Ms	Emily	Goode
			Executive Director Regulatory Operations	Ms	Prue	Monument
			Acting Chief Executive Officer	Professor	Nick (Nicholas)	Saunders
			Strategic Project Manager	Ms	Louise	Smith
			Director, Engagement Group	Dr	Karen	Treloar
Egypt	National Authority for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Education	NAQAAE	President	Prof Dr	Youhansen	Eid
India	National Assessment and Accreditation Council	NAAC	Adviser	Dr	Ponmudiraj	Belavendran Selvadurai
			Adviser	Prof Dr	Amiya	Kumar Rath
Indonesia	The National Accreditation Agency for Higher Education	BAN-PT	Director of Executive Board	Prof Dr	Chan	Basaruddin
Ireland	Quality and Qualifications Ireland	QQI	Head of Stakeholder Engagement Division	Ms	Karena	Maguire
			Chief Executive Officer	Dr	Padraig	Walsh

Country/ Region	Organisation		Job title		First name	Last name
Israel	Council for Higher Education	CHE	Executive Director	Mrs	Michal	Neumann
Japan	National Institution for Academic Degrees and Quality Enhancement of Higher Education	NIAD-QE	Special Appointed Professor	Professor	Syun	Tutiya
Kazakhstan	Independent Agency for Quality Assurance in Education	IQAA	Chief of Administrative and International Relations Unit	Mr	Daulet	Kalanov
			President	Professor	Sholpan	Kalanova
Malaysia	Malaysian Qualifications Agency	MQA	Senior Principal Assistant Director (Policy Division)	Mr	Zabib	bin Bakar
			Deputy CEO (Quality Assurance)	Prof Ir Dr	Khairul Salleh	bin Mohamed Sahari
			Senior Director (Policy and Expertise Development)	Mr	Mohamad Dzafir	bin Mustafa
			Senior Director (Accreditation)	Ms	Lilian	Kek Siew Yick
			Senior Assistant Director, Public and International Affairs Unit	Ms	Suhartini binti	Samsudin
Malta	National Commission for Further and Higher Education	NCFHE	CEO	Dr	Rose Anne	Cuschieri

Country/ Region	Organisation		Job title		First name	Last name
Netherlands	Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders	NVAO	Managing Director NVAO NL	Mr	Luut	Kroes
Nigeria	National Universities Commission	NUC	Director, Office of the Executive Secretary	Mr	Chris	Maiyaki
			Executive Secretary	Professor	Abubakar Adamu	Rasheed
Oman	Oman Academic Accreditation Authority	OAAA	Deputy CEO - Technical Affairs	Dr	Jenny	Walker
Russian Federation	National Centre for Public Accreditation	NCPA	Head of International Office	Ms	Vera	Chepurnykh
			Deputy Director	Dr	Galina	Motova
Saudi Arabia	Education and Training Evaluation Commission	ETEC	Executive Director, National Center for Academic Accreditation and Evaluation (NCAAA)	Dr	Sohail	Bajammal
			Senior Advisor, National Center for Academic Accreditation and Evaluation (NCAAA)	Professor	Hossam	Hamdy
Singapore	Committee for Private Education, SkillsFuture Singapore	CPE/SSG	Director, Regulation Division	Mr	Remy	Choo
			Principal Manager	Ms	Glenda	Huang
			Chief Registrar, Regulation Division	Ms	Michelle	Yam

Country/Region	Organisation		Job title		First name	Last name
Taiwan	Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan	HEEACT	Dean, Office of Quality Assurance	Prof Dr	Sheng-Ju	Chan
			Executive Director	Prof Dr	Angela Yung-Chi	Hou
			Project Coordinator	Mr	Dewin	Justiniano
			Assistant Research Fellow	Dr	Grace I-Jung	Lu
Thailand	Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment	ONESQA	Head of Section	Dr	Somyot	Cheejaeng
			Chief of International Affairs Unit	Ms	Nualsupak	Phunsap
Turkey	Turkish Higher Education Quality Council	THEQC	President of THEQC	Prof Dr	Muzaffer	Elmas
Ukraine	National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance	NAQA	Vice-Head	Prof Dr	Nataliia	Stukalo
			Head of Secretariat	Dr	Mychailo	Wynnyckyj
United Arab Emirates	Commission for Academic Accreditation	CAA	Commissioner	Professor	Emad	Abuelrub
			Executive Director	Prof Dr	Mohamed Yousif Hasan	Baniyas
			Commissioner	Professor	Rhys	Rowland-Jones
Abu Dhabi	Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge	ADEK	Policy and Regulation Division Director	Dr	Susanna	Karakhanyan

Country/Region	Organisation		Job title		First name	Last name
Dubai	Knowledge and Human Development Authority	KHDA	International Assessment Manager	Mrs	Dima	Radwan
			QA Coordinator	Ms	Sandy	Rodgers Trueb
			Director of Higher Education Classification & Rating Framework	Dr	Nitesh	Sughnani
Ras Al Khaimah	Ras Al Khaimah Economic Zone	RAKEZ	Academic Zone Manager	Mr	Hussain	Al Shamaa
			Director of Academic Zone	Mr	Taner	Topcu
UK	Department for Education	DfE	International Higher Education Team	Mr	Sean	Gater
	Department for International Trade	DIT	Higher Education Specialist	Ms	Aisling	Conboy
	The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education	QAA	Chief Executive	Mr	Douglas	Blackstock
			Accreditation and International Services Manager	Dr	Alison	Felce
			Quality Assurance Expert	Mr	Ian	Kimber
			Director of International and Professional Services	Miss	Stephanie	Sandford
			Executive Director of Operations and Deputy CEO	Ms	Vicki	Stott
			Lead Enterprise Consultant	Ms	Rachel	Wallace
			Quality Specialist	Mr	Ian	Welch

Country/Region	Organisation		Job title		First name	Last name
	Universities UK International	UUKi	Assistant Director, Partnerships and Mobility	Ms	Celia	Partridge
			Head of TNE	Mr	Eduardo	Ramos

Annex 2: Summary of key themes from questionnaire responses

1   To set the scene, what are the main challenges faced in the current environment by:

a   Your higher education sector?

- Impact of the downturn in international students, including on financial sustainability in some areas of the sector
- The expansion, mostly rapid, of digital and distance delivery
- Challenges of this for:
  o   maintaining student engagement and interactions
  o   students who might not have the connectivity and technology needed
  o   integrity and authentic assessment and grading
  o   teaching staff unaccustomed to these forms of delivery
  o   work-based learning, clinical and practical placements
  o   professional accreditation and registration requirements
- Disparities in technological and learning design capabilities - virtual is the 'new normal'
- Universities also have a key role in research relating to the pandemic

b   Your agency?

- Supporting the sector to deal with the challenges
- Rethinking approaches to EQA and regulation
- Maintaining quality in the face of rapid changes and uncertainty - striking the balance
- Provider viability issues
- Tackling these challenges with staff working from home
- Putting in place technology and work behaviours for staff working from home
- Being flexible and adaptable to the situation, for example:
  o   postponing/putting on hold EQA processes
  o   fast-tracking strategic approvals
  o   easing reporting requirements
  o   modifying/changing methodologies
  o   more 'virtual' components, for example, site visits, interviews
  o   more desk-based analysis and preparatory work for processes
- Retraining and capacity building to deal with new situation
- Loss of income and increase in costs
- Loss of international reviewers/experts

2   Most jurisdictions have seen a significant increase in digital delivery, with the closure of campuses, lock downs, and other social distancing measures. To the extent to which this applies in your jurisdiction:

a   What particular challenges has this presented you with?

- Issues for:
  o   pedagogy
  o   assessment/academic integrity
  o   connectivity
  o   staff capacity and expertise
  o   student engagement

- work-based learning, professional placement
- EQA/regulatory processes - not geared to digital provision

b How have you responded?

- Targeted advice and guidance on digital delivery
- Supporting institutions to develop capacity and capability
- Effective practice sharing, facilitating dialogue
- Regular internal and external communications, including to students
- Flexible and adaptable in regulatory requirements, for example, reporting move to digital delivery
- Developed new methodologies focusing on digital delivery and particular challenges
- Adjusted to new or shifting workload
- Training and upskilling for staff and reviewers in evaluating digitally-delivered progammes

The new normal

3 Do you have a sense that some of the changes in your sector and in your practices and approach, brought about by need, could be adopted in the longer term? If yes, please provide one or two examples.

- Changes in the sector:
  - more widespread adoption of digital, distance, blended delivery - the new normal
- Changes for agencies:
  - review processes to minimise unnecessary regulation/process
  - EQA at a distance
- Virtual site visits
- More desk-based research and preparation
- New technologies, for example, big data, machine learning
- Online training for reviewers
- More local reviewers:
  - new or improved processes for EQA of online/distance/blended/ digitally-delivered programmes
  - review approach to TNE

Annex 3

Summary of Forum presentations

This section of the report summarises the presentations given by quality agencies. Some terminology used, including the term 'online' can have different interpretations within and in different jurisdictions. For the purposes of these summaries, the term 'online' is used as a broad term to refer to an extensive spectrum of practice, including provision of online resources, for example, libraries or virtual learning environments, or engagement with students virtually or through digital channels.

Taiwan: Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan (HEEACT)

HEEACT has formed an 'emergency team' and developed an emergency manual to assist the sector to respond to the pandemic. They have increased the number of online meetings - internally, with providers and reviewers - and are reviewing their approach to EQA of online delivery. Taiwan has not had the levels of restriction of many other countries, so HEEACT staff can still work in the office and HEI campuses have remained open. As a result, most schedules for reviews and onsite visits for all types of accreditation have remained intact.

Nonetheless, recognising the wider move to digital delivery across the world, HEEACT is rethinking its approach to the quality and assessment of online courses.

United Arab Emirates: Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA)

The UAE government has developed Guiding Principles promoting diversification of delivery methods, including online and distance delivery. Enablers of e-learning and key challenges have been identified, along with strategies to address the challenges. With the advent of the lock down, the Ministry directed all institutions to move to online delivery, accelerating that strategy. The CAA's *Standards for Institutional Licensure and Program Accreditation (2019)* cater for online and e-learning, and to assist HEIs following the Ministerial directive, this was supplemented by the development of additional guidance. The agency has moved all regulatory/quality assurance processes online, including conducting virtual site visits. The sector has been very supportive of this strategy. Online processes link very well to the CAA's risk framework, as they can be tailored to the risk level of the provider, and feed data back into the framework. CAA is conducting an audit of the capacity of higher education providers to deliver e-learning to inform further policy development.

Netherlands and Flanders: Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatie Organisatie (NVAO) (the accreditation organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders)

HEI campuses remain closed in the Netherlands, with some reopening in part from mid-June. NVAO's regulatory/EQA processes have been and remain on hold, with providers being offered extensions of registration/accreditation periods and postponement of processes. Following extensive consultation with the sector, the agency has developed and piloted an online review process, that is applied as long as the applicant provides a sufficient and good quality self-review report and evidence in advance, and both the review panel and the applicant agree to the online process. This is to establish confidence that all parties are prepared for the virtual process, and that an outcome can be reached. Some learnings from the pilots are:

- A stable digital environment, with all involved having the requisite technology and capacity, is required.
- The proceedings should be very well organised, structured with sufficient breaks.
- While always important, the Chair of the panel role is even more critical.

- Requirement to choose and agree on a platform that all have access to and can work with.
- The review panel needs a private 'room' within the platform for its own interactions and discussions.

Following the success of the pilots, NVAO is likely to continue this approach in the future.

Oman: Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA)

The temporary closure of HEI campuses in Oman has resulted in the need for online delivery of teaching, learning and assessment - a challenge currently being met by institutions that are moving quickly to develop appropriate materials. In Oman, e-learning suits many students but not as a complete substitution for in-person interactions; furthermore, innovative solutions are required if alternatives for practical sessions (particularly in engineering and medicine) are to be found. Providers are re-focusing their services to support students with different learning preferences and to help those where a lack of access to the necessary technology, particularly internet connectivity, is currently presenting challenges to some students. The Ministry of Higher Education is monitoring the private HEIs to ensure that appropriate teaching and learning approaches are deployed and that students receive the required support.

OAAA's key response has been to listen to HEIs to understand the kind of support they need from an EQA perspective. To relieve the regulatory burden, all HEIs have been offered a one-year postponement of EQA activities with the option of an earlier review if requested: this opportunity has been put in place to support those HEIs, for example, that have undergone institutional standards assessment and are currently on conditionally accredited status awaiting reassessment. In response to the uncertainty about when restrictions may be lifted, OAAA has invested in digital resources and training to enhance its capacity to conduct **all** review processes online if the current practice of involving external reviewers in site visits is further curtailed as a result of travel restrictions. Meanwhile, staff at OAAA have been reviewing accreditation standards: generic in nature, these are robust and flexible enough to encompass online delivery and assessment, but additional indicators may be required to help guide HEIs and future EQA panel members evaluate the extended use of distance learning and the student support that this requires. The postponement of most EQA activities has afforded the agency time to undertake key aspects of internal quality management, such as reviewing EQA processes, updating manuals and piloting a new programme accreditation process to complement the institutional accreditation process already in place.

Nigeria: National Universities Commission (NUC)

Campus closures and move to online delivery in Nigeria has highlighted a significant infrastructure deficit, in relation to both students and HEIs. To begin to address this, the Nigerian government has conducted an audit of digital infrastructure needs, and NUC is lobbying for government investment to fill the gap and support the sector. NUC is also encouraging HEIs to use all available platforms and media for programme delivery. Further to this, NUC has implemented awareness campaigns on campuses to promote safety measures and a reorientation of staff/student attitudes to personal hygiene.

As NUC accreditation renewal is conducted annually in November for all HEIs, there has been no major disruption to processes until now, but the agency is planning for how to run the accreditations should restrictions still be in place come November this year. NUC and some HEIs are using video conference platforms for their internal business, but the agency has not used this technology for its regulatory/EQA processes as yet. NUC expects that the increase in online provision will continue beyond the pandemic, and the Open University of Nigeria could become the leader and exemplar in the country. There is an ongoing open and

distance learning (ODL) audit looking at infrastructure, human resourcing and tailoring to the specifics of ODL delivery. The ambition is for a post-pandemic institution to be characterised by: quality students, robust curriculum, conducive campus environments, integrated wired/wireless campus area networks (CAN), adequate bandwidth, adequate power supply and back-up.

Professor Abubakar Rasheed, Executive Secretary of NUC, is participating in the Nigeria COVID-19 Research Consortium. The Consortium is charged with bringing together all stakeholders as part of the national response to COVID-19. The response will include the research agenda, curriculum re-engineering, infrastructure, funding, intellectual property, patents, commercialisation and dissemination. It also involves the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund), Nigerian Economic Summit Group, Nigerian Centre for Disease Control and the Presidency.

Following NUC's directive, Nigerian universities are responding to the World Health Organisation's pandemic thematic research areas, including funding testing kits on a competitive basis. NUC/TETFund are also driving a process whereby funding would be made available for high impact research support, funding of laboratories and stimulating an ecosystem and university growth response.

NUC noted that it values the power of partnerships and it looks forward to leveraging on trusted partners like QAA and other networks to proactively reinvent and reposition the Nigerian University System in these precarious times, given the profundity of disruptions to social, economic and academic life in the critical months/years that lie ahead.

Ukraine: National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance (NAQA)

In Ukraine, the NAQA is required to complete review processes in three months from commencement. Pandemic restrictions have meant they needed to move quickly to online processes, including virtual site visits. These are conducted subject to the agreement of the HEI and 94% have agreed. The agency has now conducted 150 online visits. They have found access to the necessary technology, including connectivity, for both HEIs and students to be better than expected. In terms of the process, NAQA has found it provides better access to external stakeholders, and that reviewers have been confident and rigorous. The online approach is also 15% cheaper than on-site visits, which is welcomed by providers.

Turkey: Turkish Higher Education Quality Council (THEQC)

All provision in Turkey has moved to online delivery, though there have, as yet, been no policy decisions about whether this will continue beyond the pandemic restrictions. As a consequence, THEQC, which has recently become a full member of ENQA, is focusing on EQA of distance delivery and learning and has formed a working party to deliver this. The working party has published an extensive guidebook that supports higher education institutions on the quality assurance of distance education. THEQC closely monitors the decisions, adaptations and new practices made by international quality assurance agencies for site visits during the pandemic. They have begun using online meetings in their regulatory/EQA processes and are looking to learn from other agency strategies and experiences.

The new normal

Australia: Tertiary Education Quality and Standard Agency (TEQSA)

TEQSA considers that there is 'no going back'. In Australia, the move to entirely online delivery brought on by the pandemic could be a watershed moment. Greater understanding and recognition of the potential for innovation in teaching and learning from using digital

technologies, is likely to see their adoption and continuation more widely across the sector. TEQSA believes students stand ready for more digital delivery.

For TEQSA, quality assuring online delivery and e-learning at scale is the key challenge, and particularly in relation to the integrity and authenticity of assessment, the impact on student and staff experience, and student performance and outcomes. It was also noted that historically, online programmes often had lower progression and completion rates and higher attrition than face-to-face, and that these issues could be addressed and better understood as it becomes a more common delivery strategy.

In Australia, the nature of higher education could see a change, driven by government policy to have a greater match between provision and skills needs, and support for short courses and microcredentials for reskilling.

TEQSA also flagged that responding to the pandemic had accelerated its move towards a more partnership-based approach to regulation/EQA, with good levels of collaboration with HEIs and representative bodies, and with professional regulators. The agency had moved quickly to provide information, advice and guidance on key topics to assist the sector, and in partnership with it, and this had been received very positively.

Malaysia: Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA)

The closure of HEI campuses in Malaysia from 18 March 2020, with very short notice due to the enforcement of the Movement Control Order (MCO), has presented some particular challenges to the sector and the agency. Based on a survey by MQA, 94.1% of 186 HEIs made swift changes by shifting at least the 'theoretical' part of their programmes to virtual and online learning. Necessary adjustments also had to be made to the disrupted academic systems which include modifications to academic calendars, assessments, grading systems, practical components and industrial training.

To support these changes and modifications, MQA is allowing some flexibility to its accreditation provisions whereby HEIs with conventional deliveries are encouraged to go for online/virtual learning in ensuring critical aspects or components of student progression, achievements and welfare. To date, MQA has published two guidelines on the delivery of higher education programmes and local student admissions. MQA will continue to provide guidance and advice on pertinent topics of concern as required from time to time.

MQA is also currently making necessary adjustments to its operations, with some of its quality assurance activities and assessments temporarily put on hold or extended to allow this. Like many other external quality assurance agencies, MQA is considering conducting virtual accreditation assessments through online and virtual review methods. MQA is currently drafting guidelines for these methods, which must be rolled out quickly.

The agency expects that the future will be characterised by redesigned approaches to teaching and learning for institutional sustainability, the provision of more advice and guidance to the higher education sector, and increased collaboration and coordination between regulatory stakeholders including professional bodies.

United Arab Emirates (Dubai): Knowledge and Human Development Agency (KHDA)

As outlined by the Commission for Academic Accreditation, all HEIs in the UAE have moved to entirely online provision and e-learning, and this applies to institutions and their branch campuses operating in Dubai. KHDA notes that technological and teaching capacity for this varies, and this links back to the capacity of the home country and institution. KHDA operates a validation system, relying on the regulatory/EQA regimes of the home country, and this is challenging for the EQA of provision in Dubai in the current circumstances, in

relation to the quality assurance and recognition of online provision and e-learning. The agency also notes that there is likely to be a financial and operational impact on HEIs operating in Dubai, with a downturn in international students, and the nature of most institutions' operating models, with 'fly in' staff.

KHDA has been focusing on data gathering so it can understand any emerging quality issues. It sees these as being assessment and exams, and work and practice experience placements. The agency also has a communications platform for dissemination of information to HEIs. It has piloted online regulatory/EQA processes and anticipates that a blended approach will be adopted in the future. KHDA also intends to review its regulations to ensure they are in step with a digital future that has been brought forward by the pandemic.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Education and Training Evaluation Commission (ETEC)

The ETEC, with its remit for quality of all education and training in Saudi Arabia, is rolling out its 'Quality 4.0' strategy, with digital transformation at its heart. This has been accelerated by the pandemic, with all HEIs switching to online delivery and e-learning. The ETEC has revisited regulatory/EQA standards to ensure online is clearly incorporated at the core with a vision to implement virtual site visits. It is noted that the country is now allowing international HEIs to operate there, and that online needs to be built into the regulations governing incoming HEIs.

The ETEC has a strategy to outsource programme accreditation to 'licenced' agencies outside the country, in parallel with the national accreditation, and this too has been sped up by the pandemic. The agency is working to empower professional bodies to undertake all programme accreditation in relevant areas.

Ireland: Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)

For QQI, a positive impact of the Irish response to the pandemic has been the collaborative approach between stakeholders and responsible parties to the many challenges. Through a Tertiary Education Steering Group led by the Department of Education and Skills, QQI is seeking to provide reassurance that the quality of programmes and qualifications will be maintained. The group has developed a set of guiding principles and a range of advice and guidance for the sector. For the future, QQI agrees that there will be 'no going back' and that the circumstances present an opportunity to embrace the innovative potential of a 'digital future'. While QQI is moving to more digital approaches to accreditation, it is also recognised that this will not be possible for many practice-based elements of programmes, and that new strategies need to be developed. The agency is conducting a 'lessons learned' exercise to identify what has worked well and where there is scope for enhancement in relation to changed approaches to teaching, learning and assessment.

UK: Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)

Early on in the pandemic, QAA sought to gather practice from other countries and benefitted from learning about different approaches, particularly around flexibility in embracing social distancing and new technologies. With that learning in mind and from discussion with the UK higher education sector about the challenges next year poses, QAA identified several key themes common across many institutions. These include:

- The need for a new taxonomy to define more precisely what we mean by the various words used to describe virtual delivery of teaching and learning, so students can be clear what to expect from their studies. The word 'online' is commonly used, however, clarity is needed over whether provision is comprised of planned online pedagogy delivered entirely online, or whether it is blended learning, or dual

delivery, and so on. It is also important that students are clear on whether delivery will be synchronous, so that all students can access it at the same time, no matter where in the world they are, or asynchronous, so students can access it at times which best suit them.

- Addressing 'digital poverty' and accessibility issues, which exist in the UK, and, based on the discussions in the Forum, many other countries. This includes not only technology, but also quiet spaces to study. Many UK HEIs are making significant efforts to make hardship funding available to students affected by these issues.

- The student learning experience, and the idea that learning is a social phenomenon, as well as an intellectual endeavour. Key questions that remain pertinent even for the very best designed virtual delivery include how to create learning communities that are meaningful to students, and how to compensate for the limited social contact the public health guidelines will allow. Further, student feedback strongly indicates that the whole experience of university is important to them, so the questions around the rites of passage of coming to university, of making lifelong networks and how these might be replicated, also loom large.

- The flexibility issue acknowledges that many institutions will be providing a mixture of provision, some being virtual and some physical. Many institutions are thinking about how students can define their own models of engagement in this context - moving between the virtual and physical modes as their needs and abilities to engage dictates.

- Greater flexibility in provision through microcredentials and portability of learning. Particularly, the ability to break learning into small chunks that could, potentially, be moved between institutions or allow students to put their learning on pause for a period of time. This would aid not only mobility of study, but also the upskilling of people who are perhaps finding themselves suddenly unemployed.

Among these critical issues facing the higher education sector in the UK, QAA's role is to provide guidance and support to ensure that standards and quality are maintained and student experience, expectations and outcomes are protected.

Additional comments

Russian Federation: National Centre for Public Accreditation (NCPA)

NCPA have piloted virtual accreditation in the current circumstances and taken some valuable lessons from the experience which will help with further innovation in their approach.

Kazakhstan: Independent Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (IQAA)

IQAA regulations currently do not allow for virtual site visits, but they anticipate moving to a form of blended accreditation process in the future.

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