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Educational Programs Accreditation in Pandemic Times: Challenges for NAQA (Ukraine)

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Abstract: The article discusses the first-year results of Ukraine's NAQA work – the agency, whose activity is aimed at ensuring higher education quality. The results of the accreditation evaluation of the educational programs of Ukrainian universities are presented. More than 60% of the programs have been accredited, about 34% received conditional accreditation with the possibility to rectify the noted shortcomings within 1 year, and in more than 2% of cases HEIs have been refused in accreditation. The most changes in the accreditation process because of coronavirus pandemic began in March 2020. It was decided to use the provisional accreditation procedures using information technology tools and videoconferencing to respond to COVID-19 quarantine challenges. The current situation forces interview with stakeholders, discussions within the expert group, meetings with HEIs and NAQAs representatives to be done using videoconferencing and other IT tools (distance format). Given the uncertain situation in the world, it is argued that quality assurance agencies should be prepared to address these challenges and should develop alternative approaches and suggestions to pursue the same high quality of the accreditation procedures.

Keywords: *National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance (NAQA); accreditation; higher education; COVID-19.*

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1. Introduction

The Ukrainian higher education quality assurance system has just been launched recently and it is still in the process of development. The reforming of the Ukrainian higher education sector has started after 2014 aiming to establish a system aligned with the European higher education and research area (EHEA, 2015), to develop quality assurance system at national and institutional levels, and to highly involve students, employers and the other stakeholders into the decision-making and quality assurance process. The Law on higher education adopted in the summer 2014 established the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance (NAQA). The NAQA first personal composition was elected in 2015, but due to some reasons it has never started its official work. The new NAQA personal composition was elected by the International competition commission and approved by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine in December 2018 (NAQA, 2020). According to the legislation the NAQA is responsible for setting requirements for quality and transparency for institutions, programs, and standards, implements state policy in the field of higher education and withstands modern challenges.

2. NAQA: first steps and accreditations

To reflect these priorities and the ESG-2015 standards (ENQA, 2015) as well as European best practices the NAQA has developed the Regulation on Study Programs Accreditation (NAQA, 2020) and it was adopted in August 2019 by the Ukrainian Cabinet of Ministers. So, the new study program accreditation process has been started in September 2019 and 370 accreditations have been completed by March 2020 (table 1). Around 34% of these accreditation programs got conditional 1-year accreditation and 9 out of 370 study programs got denials (2,4%). Only 5 out of 370 study programs got distinction level accreditation and were recognized as innovative (1,4%).

The new accreditation criteria are fully aligned with the ESG-2015 and accreditation procedure includes:

- a HEIs applies for accreditation and NAQA suggests the period of accreditation and assigns an expert group;
- the expert group includes at least three members. A student expert is included into each group. An employer expert can be included as additional expert. The experts are informed that they are acting in a personal capacity and not representing their constituent organizations when working

for NAQA. The accreditation decisions are solely based on expertise. This is reflected in the regulatory documents and Code of ethics of an expert;

- after three days site visit to the HEIs the expert group develops expert conclusion and suggests the grade (A – innovative distinction-level accreditation; B – accreditation; E – conditional 1-year accreditation; F – denial of accreditation);

- the subject area council reviews the experts' conclusions and verifies them as well as develops suggestions for NAQA;

- NAQA validates experts' conclusions and subject area council's suggestions and makes a final decision.

Table 1. Statistics of educational programs accreditation in Ukraine (NAQA, 2020)

Date of NAQA's decision	Accreditation (5 years)	Denial of accreditation	Innovative accreditation (10 years)	Conditional (deferred) accreditation (1 year)	**Overall result**
27.11.2019	1	-	-	1	**2**
23.12.2019	98	1	2	38	**139**
13.01.2020	10	-	2	5	**17**
28.01.2020	113	6	-	71	**190**
17.02.2020	2	-	1	6	**9**
03.03.2020	7	2	-	4	**13**
Overall result	**231**	**9**	**5**	**125**	**370**
%	**62,4**	**2,4**	**1,4**	**33,8**	**100**

3. NAQA response to COVID-19 pandemic challenges

Both European and US accreditation centers respond to the pandemic 2020, developing new "rules of the game".

As a reaction to COVID-19 the ENQA Board and secretariat have canceled 2020 Members' Forum. The accompanying General Assembly will now be conducted online. Also, ENQA is in active communication with other agencies and offers flexibility in future work with the universities. "ENQA suggests for quality assurance agencies to show flexibility in their own review processes, adapt their current activities where necessary and seek ways to support higher education institutions, who are facing an unprecedented disruption to their normal operations. Quality assurance agencies in pandemic time play a crucial role in offering guidance and

support on matters such as the transfer to online learning and teaching, alternative assessment methods and maintaining academic standards and student support services. To help facilitate this ENQA has launched a social media campaign to encourage agencies to share their policies, practices and other resources so that members can learn from each other" (ENQA, 2020).

The federal government of US has recently provided for flexibility in the application of the standards and the processes of accrediting organizations. "This federal guidance is focused on the expansion of distance learning, the opportunity to conduct site visits virtually or postpone them and how accrediting organizations might modify their policies to accommodate the current environment. At the same time, each accrediting organization is an independent body and is applying this flexibility within the framework of its set of standards and practices" (CHEA, 2020). This means the individual accrediting organization is the most authoritative source of information for any questions or concerns about accredited status. The March 17, 2020 US guidance document states "that accreditors can perform virtual site visits, which must be interactive, for institutions if the accreditor follows up with an onsite visit in a reasonable amount of time" (USDE, 2020).

On March 11, 2020 the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine made decision on nationwide quarantine till April 3, 2020 and then extended it till April 24, 2020. It is also expected that nationwide quarantine potentially can be extended further depending on the pandemic situation in the world and Ukraine in the second part of April. For higher education system it means that all Universities and the other HEIs are closed and they move all their activities to distant (online) forms. Each HEI develops own approach to the organization of the study process and uses different tools of online educational services.

Initially NAQA's accreditation approach was digitalized and based on electronic workflow: all documents are submitted by HEIs in electronic form, expert groups and subject area councils review the cases, vote and submit their decisions and suggestions on the NAQA platform. Recently NAQA has also implemented online final meetings of subject area councils with experts and HEIs using Teams tool. However, there are two procedures where the face-to-face presence is required:

1) the site visit of the expert group to the HEIs;

2) NAQA meeting for final decision making.

On March 12, 2020 and March 26, 2020, the Head of NAQA issued orders to cancel site-visits to HEIs during COVID-19 quarantine (NAQA, 2020). In parallel there were discussions among NAQA members how to

ensure further accreditation process and to avoid any potential delays in HEIs' issuing diplomas for students. As a result it was decided to use provisional accreditation procedure using information technology tools and videoconferencing (NAQA, 2020) to respond COVID-19 quarantine challenges. This provisional accreditation procedure is based on the following principles:

- this is temporary procedure only and it can apply during nationwide COVID-19 quarantine only;
- the decision to apply this procedure to each particular study program is made by NAQA on the basis of the investigation of each case, documents submitted by the HEI, previous site-visits to this particular HEI, and the other available materials and information about the HEI and study program;
- the expertise should be done in full, all meetings with stakeholders must be ensured and all accreditation criteria must be evaluated properly;
- experts and the other participants of the accreditation process must avoid face-to-face contacts. All interviews with stakeholders, discussions within expert group, meetings with HEI and NAQA representatives should be done using videoconferencing and other IT tools;
- NAQA Secretariat provides technical support and advices all participants of the process accordingly.

The first site-visits using this provisional accreditation procedure started on March 23, 2020. The feedback of experts, HEIs, the other stakeholders and NAQA observers received on March 27 is positive: ZOOM tool works properly and meetings participants feel comfortable using it, it allows experts manages to interview all focus groups and to talk to all stakeholders, NAQA Secretariat representatives are supportive, all participants are satisfied with the procedure, NAQA observes consider the process to be effective and aligned with all criteria and requirements. The next step is to ensure effective NAQA online meetings allowing all stakeholders participation to make final decisions on these accreditation cases. NAQA currently discusses the options to be ready to respond to this challenge as according to the procedure NAQA should do it approximately in a month after the site visit.

4. Conclusion

New global challenges associated with the world COVID-19 pandemic set some new imperatives for all countries and their educational systems to ensure continuous and high quality education at all levels, to raise

people's digital competencies, creative abilities, moral qualities, solidarity and social responsibility to the benefit of society in this anxious times.

NAQA makes just first attempts to make online site visits and no final decisions on these accreditations have been taken yet. However at least it can be considered as the first experience of responding the quality assurance process challenges associated with the global pandemic. This experience can be useful for other agencies in different countries. And all recommendations NAQA will accumulate and share out between all stakeholders. Now it is obvious that we can hardly predict how long pandemic will last, so quality assurance agencies should be ready to address these challenges and should develop alternative approaches and suggestions ensuring the same high quality of the accreditation procedures.

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