



Procedural Guidelines for the Conduct of Remote (Online) External Evaluations and Virtual Site-Visits

Introduction

ESG require normally a site-visit, but exceptional times call for exceptional measures. CYQAA's external evaluation activities go online, a procedure which is acceptable for ENQA and EQAR considering the circumstances.

To this end, an appropriate amendment to the Law has been approved by the House of Representatives on 2 June 2020 (http://www.dipae.ac.cy/archeia/nomothesia/2020_1_054.pdf).

For the conduct of online external evaluation and virtual site visits at programmatic and departmental level, CYQAA maintains the following principles:

- They are carried out by external experts, including a student member
- Independence, professionalism
- Confidentiality and safety (protected e-tools, identification of participants, etc.)
- Training, briefing
- Participation of/interviews with different stakeholders

However, online evaluations are more demanding in terms of preparation of the agency, of the External Evaluation Committees (EECs), and of the institutions.

General Information

- The Cyprus Agency of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education (CYQAA) is the competent authority in Cyprus for ensuring the quality of higher education.
- The Agency was established in November 2015. It is a public organization, fully independent in processes and decisions which are all based on CYQAA's law.
- CYQAA is a full member of ENQA, registered on EQAR and recognized by the WFME.
- Amongst other competencies, the CYQAA conducts institutional, departmental and programmatic evaluations and, according to the experts' reports, the Agency decides in favour of accreditation, rejection or a second evaluation.
- In Cyprus' higher education sector, programmes of study are offered by 8 universities (3 public and 5 private) and 45 higher education schools (colleges, non-university). The operation of each programme of study is not permitted unless it has received programmatic evaluation/accreditation, which is repeated every five (5) years.

- Cyprus has fully adopted the Bologna Process and thus CYQAA operates in accordance with its guidelines. Consequently, 1st (Bachelor), 2nd (Master) and 3rd cycle (PhD) degrees are offered. In addition, short-cycle degrees are offered by higher education schools (non-university) only.
- According to Cyprus Law:

Cycle	Degree	Duration	ECTS
Short-cycle	Certificate	1 year	60
	Diploma	2 years	120
	Higher Diploma	3 years	180
1 st	Bachelor	4 years minimum	240
2 nd	Master	1 year, 1½ 2 years	90 or 120
3 rd	PhD	3 years minimum	it varies

External Evaluation Committees are expected to consult the ECTS Guide and to verify the correspondence of the programme under evaluation with the academic requirements of each level.

- According to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), which is the common European reference framework whose purpose is to make qualifications more readable and understandable across different countries and systems, the CYQAA adopts and applies the descriptors defining the eight (8) reference levels indicating the relevant learning outcomes.

The EEC should examine whether the content and the delivery of the programme, as well as students' assessments, correspond to the EQF. Special attention should be given to the Master level's correspondence to the EQF.

<https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/content/descriptors-page>

- According to the legislation, members of the EEC are academics from different countries in Europe, with one university student from a public university in Cyprus and a member of the professional association, responsible for giving the license to operate the specific occupation (for regulated occupations only). In addition, an expert on distance learning methodology is also appointed as a member of the EEC on the evaluation of a distance learning programme.

In institutional evaluations two additional members join the committee, an expert on building and technological infrastructures and an expert on student welfare services. All members of the EEC are equal in terms of expressing their ideas and equitably contributing to the writing of the experts' report.

Remote Evaluation Process:

The remote evaluation process includes four phases:

- Application for evaluation accompanied by department's/programme's self-evaluation study.
- The remote external evaluation, is carried out with the contribution of a panel of independent experts selected by the Agency. This process includes, in particular, the study of the application and of the self-study, a remote/virtual site-visit and the writing of the experts' report.

- The institution's response. The experts' evaluation report is sent to the institution for its response, including the actions taken for compliance and the action plan drawn up and implemented by the institution. Compliance may need to be verified by the experts' panel.
- The Council's decision for accreditation/rejection or second evaluation.
- Based on the HEI's application for evaluation and the remote/virtual site visit conducted, the EEC completes the external evaluation report the day after the site visit is conducted. The EEC completes one report for each programme of study under evaluation in the case of programmatic evaluation.
- According to the relevant legislation, the HEI is given a period of up to 3 months to respond to the EEC's comments on the external evaluation report, and to make the necessary amendments.
- The remote/virtual site visit schedule is prepared by the CYQAA and it is sent to the EEC and the HEI before the evaluation. The EEC, within its competencies, may amend the schedule in ways it sees fit for the unobstructed conduct of the external evaluation.
- On the basis of the external evaluation report, the recommendations of the EEC and the HEI's response on the external evaluation report, the Council of CYQAA decides whether a programme of study/department a) must be accredited, b) must be rejected or c) a second evaluation should be carried out. The experts' feedback report opinion/advice on the Institution's reply may be asked before the decision.
- Suggestions for improvement may be included in the Agency's final report and a follow-up process should be activated based on a timely flexible action plan submitted by the HEI. From that point of view, evaluation against standards is always considered a process of improvement.
- A process of appeals is provided by the legislation: The institution may, within one (1) month from the receipt of the final report of the Agency, submit an appeal/raise an objection requesting its review by the Agency, stating the grounds which, in its opinion, justify the withdrawal and the review of the evaluation report. The appeal's examination by the Agency shall be carried out based on the data contained in the evaluation file of the institution and the grounds set out in the objection in order to issue a relevant decision. An amendment of the legislation provides that the Council may assign an ad hoc advisory committee to examine the appeal before the final decision by the Agency.
- The decisions of the CYQAA are subject to appeals to the court.

Reports

- As a full member of ENQA, the content of CYQAA's reports is in agreement with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG).
- All the forms used for the process of evaluation reflect the stakeholders' observations, the experts' feedback, possible restrictions provided by the legislation's framework, and the ESG. The forms' review process takes place regularly every two years.
- The HEI completes the 'Application Form for External Evaluation' (Doc. 200.1/Doc. 200.2/Doc. 200.3). The HEI's application and other relevant material are sent to the members of the EEC approximately one month before the site visit.
- The EEC completes the 'External Evaluation Report' (Doc. 300.1.1). A PDF version of the report is signed and sent to the CYQAA the day after the remote evaluation/virtual site visit is completed. An electronic pdf copy is sent by the chair of the committee to the responsible

CYQAA officer without signatures, in order to be uploaded on CYQAA's web site with all other related documents.

- The HEI completes the 'Higher Education Institution's Response' (Doc. 300.1.2).
- The EEC is asked for feedback on document 'Feedback from EEC Experts' (Doc. 300.1.3).

Content of the Reports (DOCS. 300)

<http://www.dipae.ac.cy/index.php/en/evaluation-en/forms-en>

Doc. 300.1.1

- The external evaluation report follows the structure of assessment areas, with standards, which are relevant to the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), and some guiding questions that the EEC may find useful.
- Under each assessment area, the EEC must provide feedback regarding the degree of compliance with the requirements. In particular, the EEC is expected to write findings, strengths, areas of improvement and recommendations.
- The EEC should state the compliance for each sub-area, which must be in agreement with everything stated in the report.
- Appropriateness of the admission criteria, including the threshold of enrolment, must also be examined in all the programmes of the 8 levels of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). <https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/content/descriptors-page>
- The EEC should state the conclusions and final remarks regarding the programme of study as a whole.
- In addition, particular attention should be paid to the standards regarding the e-learning programmes, the doctoral programmes and joint programmes of study. The standards can be found in the External Evaluation Report (Doc. 300.1.1), in the particular section.

Guidelines for the Members of the External Evaluation Committees for Remote Evaluations and Remote/Virtual Site Visits:

- The agenda is drafted by the Agency and sent to the EEC.
- The CYQAA officer conducts a briefing of the EEC (online) which is scheduled before the remote site-visit. The EEC members are advised to study all the materials sent to them so that during the briefing they may pose questions in regard to CYQAA's policies, legislation, procedures or request additional information from the institution.
- The CYQAA officer will be the host of the Remote/Virtual site visit
- The Chair of the EEC will be the co-host of the Remote/Virtual site visit
- The Agency will use waiting room functionality and actively invite participants
- The length of each session does not exceed 60 min
- There are breaks between every session
- If EEC members wish to spend time after each session for debriefing and discussing their findings amongst themselves the CYQAA officer may be requested to open an additional "room" for discussion or they may do so via sending private messages in the chatroom.

- The Chair of the EEC will preside all sessions.
- The Chair of the EEC acts as the moderator or assigns this task to one of the experts in the EEC
- The Chair of the EEC assigns the task of the rapporteur to one of the experts in the EEC
- The EEC have the right to agree not to complete the review online if they do not feel sufficiently confident and inform the CYQAA Council of the reasons. In this case a site-visit to the institution's premises may be scheduled when the circumstances allow it
- All sessions will focus on clarifications/discussion (NOT PRESENTATIONS) of the following assessment areas:

1. Study programme and study programme's design and development

- 1.1. Policy for quality assurance
- 1.2. Design, approval, on-going monitoring and review
- 1.3. Public information
- 1.4. Information management

2. Student – centred learning, teaching and assessment

- 2.1 Process of teaching and learning and student-centred teaching methodology
- 2.2 Practical training
- 2.3 Student assessment

3. Teaching staff

- 3.1. Teaching staff recruitment and development
- 3.2. Teaching staff number and status
- 3.3. Synergies of teaching and research

4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification

- 4.1. Student admission, processes and criteria
- 4.2. Student progression
- 4.3. Student recognition
- 4.4. Student certification

5. Learning resources and student support

- 5.1. Teaching and learning resources
- 5.2. Physical resources
- 5.3. Human support resources
- 5.4. Student support

- In regard to the infrastructure, institutions may send a video and/or photos to the Agency. In the case the EEC wishes to see the infrastructures on the date of the remote/virtual site visit the institution will be notified by the Agency to make the necessary arrangements.
- In case of open questions after the virtual meeting the Agency will schedule another shorter meeting.

Guidelines for Institutions:

- The agenda is drafted by the Agency and sent to the EEC.
- The length of each session does not exceed 60 min
- There are breaks between every session
- Participants should be limited down to 10 participants per session including the members of the EEC (avoid more than 15-20 participants including experts)
- The list of participants for each session, including (a) name, (b) position, (c) email address, should be sent to the Agency well ahead of time.

- **Participants representing the institution will be in WAITING ROOM and the CYQAA officer (host) will allow access only to the persons indicated by the institution ahead of time for each session.**
- The institution will inform the Agency who will speak/answer questions on behalf of the institution for each session
- Clear discussion rules:
 - Avoid welcome rounds and use (short) icebreaker rounds instead
 - Participants may shortly introduce themselves (name, position) during discussion
- To improve audio quality participants to the sessions should/may,
 - keep microphones shut while not talking
 - use a headset
 - avoid spaces with background noise (i.e., refrain from having all participants to the session in one conference room)
- In regard to the infrastructure, institutions may send a short video (max 5 minutes) to the Agency. In the case the EEC wishes to see the infrastructures on the date of the remote visit, the institution should be prepared and will be notified by the Agency to make the necessary arrangements.