

Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education

FIDES FACIT FIDEM: Dezvoltarea prin comunicare și transparență a unui process de AC fundamentat pe încredere

Serhiy Kvit, Nataliia Stukalo

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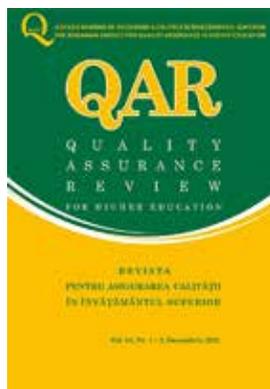
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FIDES FACIT FIDEM¹: Building Trust-Based QA through Supportive Communication and Transparency

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Abstract: *Maintaining trust among all quality assurance (QA) process participants is critically important in emergency QA systems, especially during crisis times. Supportive communication and transparency are essential tools of QA to develop trustworthy relations of QA Agencies with the stakeholders. This qualitative study discusses how supportive communication and transparency contribute to trust-building and maintaining and the fundamental principles and factors of the QA Agency trustworthiness. There is a discussion of the Ukrainian case of two-years transition from an 'old' accreditation system lacking confidence to a trust-based QA system. Some good practices of supportive communication in QA during the global pandemic 2020 are presented. NAQA case study and questionnaire are used to conduct this study. It is concluded that transparency policy, social media tools and projects, webinars, Q&A sessions, open communication play a crucial role in QA when there is a lack of trust in the academic environment and face-to-face communication is not available.*

Keywords: *quality assurance, trust, supportive communication, transparency, Ukraine, good practices of supportive communication*

Rezumat: *Menținerea încrederii în rândul tuturor participanților la procesul de asigurare a calității (AC) este extrem de importantă în sistemele de asigurare a calității, în special în perioadele de criză. Comunicarea suport și transparența sunt instrumente esențiale ale AC, necesare creării unor relații de încredere ale agențiilor de AC cu părțile interesate. Acest studiu calitativ prezintă modul în care comunicarea suport și transparența contribuie la consolidarea și menținerea încrederii, precum și principiile și factorii fundamentali ai încrederii în Agențiile de AC. Este prezentat cazul Ucrainei, de tranziție pe o perioadă de doi ani de la un sistem de acreditare vechi, lipsit de încredere, la un sistem de AC bazat pe încredere. Sunt prezentate câteva bune practici de comunicare suport în AC, din*

¹ From Latin “Trust creates Trust”

timpul pandemiei globale din 2020. Studiul de caz NAQA și chestionarul sunt utilizate pentru a realiza cercetarea. S-a concluzionat că politica de transparență, instrumentele și proiectele de comunicare socială, webinarile, sesiunile de întrebări și răspunsuri, comunicarea deschisă joacă un rol crucial în AC atunci când există o lipsă de încredere în mediul academic, iar comunicarea față în față nu este disponibilă.

Cuvinte cheie: asigurarea calității, încredere, comunicare suport, transparență, Ucraina, bune practice de comunicare suport

Introduction

The emerging quality assurance (QA) systems are often characterized by a lack of trust among the participants of the QA process. The initial absence of consistent and reliable QA and the 'old' formal approach to accreditations in such systems caused huge mutual mistrust both at the institutional level (government mistrusted academia and, in response, academia mistrusted government) and within the academic environment. Besides, at the initial stage of the QA standards implementation, the level of trust also remained relatively low because of new regulations, procedures, and challenges in new standards completion, lack of understanding of the new approach and past dependence in the perception of the educational innovations.

Global pandemic 2020 caused additional pressure on such emerging quality assurance systems due to abnormal changes in teaching and learning and external and internal QA of higher education (HE). An unprecedented level of uncertainty impacts Universities and HE stakeholders, making them look for additional support and guidance. Our recent research (Stukalo, 2020) has demonstrated that the role of QA Agencies has been extended during emerging situations. Consultative, supportive and practice-sharing functions are becoming more significant, implemented at the meta-level and applicable locally, nationally and internationally. However, these functions can be efficiently implemented only with relevant communication tools. Effective and open communication during pandemic builds trust, which 'is imperative in a crisis' (Reynolds and Quinn, 2008).

Study Aim and Research Questions

This study aims to enhance concepts of supportive communication and transparency as essential functions of QA in emerging systems and emergencies to maintain trustworthy relations between QA Agencies, the stakeholders and the whole society. The research questions to be answered as a result of this study: What does the concept of supportive communication mean in quality assurance, and how does it contribute to trust-building? What are the fundamental principles and factors of the QA Agency trustworthiness? What are good practices of supportive communication and transparency in emerging QA systems and during the global pandemic 2020?

Research Methodology

This qualitative research is based on the case study and questionnaire methods. First, the case of Ukraine and the Ukrainian National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance (NAQA) is analyzed. This research also considers two questionnaires on NAQA communication strategy: the first - for NAQA experts and the second - for HE institutions' representatives. As a result of questionnaires distribution, 646 responses of experts and 521 responses of HE institutions representatives are collected by NAQA and used in this study. Besides, some publicly available materials on the same experience of the international QA networks are also used.

Background of the Issue: the Case of Distrust to 'Old' Accreditation System in Ukraine

Before 2019 when the new regulations on quality assurance aligned to ESG-2015 were adopted, officially, the accreditation process looked quite transparent and accessible. It was regulated by the State Accreditation Requirements (2012) and envisaged compliance with the Licensing Conditions (2011) through self-analysis and expert assessment. Such parameters defined the quality of higher education as available highly qualified personnel, physical and technical infrastructure, teaching, learning, and informational support, and a positive trend (towards an increase) in the number of students. In practice, everything was upside down and full of problems. Accreditation requirements were unrealistically high and based on quantitative indicators only. They were pettily extra-detailed and unified without regard to the nature of different HEIs, the features of study programs (specializations) in different training areas or regional contexts. That model allowed only influential universities that received enough resources from the state for institutional development to pass accreditation successfully.

Those requirements were excessive for smaller-scale, provincial, and private educational institutions. So, they were forced to look for informal ways of settling accreditation issues. It was a common practice when experts, especially members of Sectoral Expert Councils (in specific fields of knowledge), assessed a study program from the standpoint of their educational institution or considered it exclusively as a potential competitor. As a result, that approach pushed towards monopolization of the market of educational services and depreciation of institutional development to ensure the quality of higher education.

Correctly prescribed on paper but insensitive to the demands of the time and actual needs of the higher education system, the quantitative analysis criteria would push university administrations towards "double-standard moral" as a way to survive. On the one hand, non-compliance with the requirements set by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine (MES) would entail the loss of license and shutdown of the educational program (specialization) but, on the other hand, compliance with the requirements would make it economically unfeasible and overall unattractive

for students. For example, it was not permitted to hire professionals with practical experience to teach if they had no academic degree in a particular field.

The ratio of instructors to students remained one of the most unreachable and at the same time invariable regulations under the accreditation algorithm in the past. Furthermore, a real challenge for HEIs was created with the inconsistencies between regulatory documents, which resulted in their different interpretations by the Ministry officials.

State officials who were "assigned" to supervise certain accreditation cases and regarded "in charge" of their registration and preparation for accreditation.

And finally – their selective implementation. The lack of information, methodology support, and essential transparency made academic integrity virtually impossible. Even final decisions (including regulatory ones) or minutes of the meetings of the accreditation bodies were considered confidential.

The main task of HEIs representatives was to formalize the "accreditation file properly". However, the imposed requirements often looked vague. Any consultations with "specialists" were exclusively private. Due to the lack of a single agreed interpretation of the existing requirements, which were full of contradictions, several parallel approaches could have emerged within an accreditation institution. So, a logical solution to all the problems used to be to seek communication with an MES specialist (who, as we can see, had their own "unique interpretation") assigned to a particular university.

Because of the detected technical drawbacks or inconsistencies (which were usually quite frequent under those circumstances), an accreditation file would not be registered and bounced back to the university, and the accreditation procedure would be postponed for an indefinite period. To prepare and formalize an accreditation file, it was necessary to collect many paper documents and certificates. A thoroughly prepared file could be rejected due to petty objections to its design (size of the margins or fonts). One way or another, all that prompted informal relations between HEIs and accreditation "specialists".

The appointment of experts for accreditation was not systematic. The main task of HEIs was to obtain informal approval of the educational program (specialization) by the Ministry of Education and Science. In practice, it would mean reaching an agreement and attaining a favourable decision from the experts. HEIs representatives could have a preliminary agreement with familiar individuals who would later be approved as experts to assess a particular degree program.

There were cases when the same experts would be "present" on the same day in different HEIs (in different regions of Ukraine), which meant that sometimes they would not physically appear in a particular university for accreditation expertise procedure. The experts were not subject to centralized selection under objective and pre-announced requirements.

One cannot say that the system did not work, but it cannot be considered efficient either. Professional experts were also involved in the process. At the same time,

no special training of experts was required, and their field visits were not duly regulated. Due to the favourable treatment of some (large public) universities, the accreditation requirements were not objective. Some accreditation files were reviewed in detail, typically if the entire academic community was already aware of the problems or received reasoned complaints against those universities.

Those mentioned above may give a mistaken impression that no real consultations on improving the quality of educational programs or expert help, sharing experience, and best practices existed at all. Academic communities saw how absurd, over-bureaucratized, and oppressive that kind of accreditation system was. Quite often, during an experts' visit, a sincere and constructive conversation would occur in informal settings, a trust-based relationship would be established. However, the experts would only issue a formalized response under official settings, which showed a low level of trust in the existing procedures and institutions.

Accordingly, the internal quality assurance system was reduced to administering the so-called "Rector's tests", which were supposed to assess the level of "residual knowledge" (the knowledge that a student had acquired by attending previous courses and which had already been assessed by course examinations). This technology was also part of the accreditation procedures when experts were visiting HEIs. Some well-established Soviet norms, such as regular peer attending classes within a department, were generally ignored in post-Soviet Ukraine.

Most importantly, accreditation was not viewed in the context of external quality assurance. As a result, no understanding was there either of the importance of developing an original internal academic culture in higher education institutions, mutual balanced demands, and integrity, which should have cultivated the quality of learning, teaching, and scientific research. Both concepts emerged in Ukraine when drafting the "Law on Higher Education", primarily during 2012, which the Parliament approved immediately after the 2014 Revolution of Dignity (Kvit, 2020).

In 2015, a National Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education was expected to start functioning. However, that did not happen partly due to objective reasons: the Law on Higher Education (2014) contains neither specific requirements for NAQA members nor a specific election procedure. Also, there was a long list of those who wanted to take control of accreditation processes seeming to be "falling off" the hands of the Ministry as part of the national decentralization policy and implementation of university autonomy.

After relevant legislative changes in 2017, the International Competition Commission was formed, and the new composition of NAQA was selected and approved. The official launch of NAQA was in February 2019 after the Cabinet of Ministers approval of the NAQA Head and Vice-Heads.

So, in February 2019, NAQA started developing and implementing a new QA policy and system in the environment of distrust and non-perception of accreditation in the academic sphere and was also challenged by society incredulity. Moreover, the critical issue was raised at the first NAQA meeting – how to build trust in the QA system?

Supportive communication and transparency for building trust in QA

Supportive communication is considered helpful given verbally and nonverbally in stressful, emergency and uncertain situations. This topic is mainly investigated at the individual and psychological levels. However, some studies are devoted to effective communication in organizations (Rajhans, 2018). In this study, we consider supportive communication as a part of organizational culture in the form of comprehensive help and guidance given by an organization to all stakeholders internally and externally. Supportive communication importance may rise during emerging situations. However, the author believes that it can be effective only if it is a part of organizational culture regardless of the times and circumstances and based on organizational values.

Management theory argues another essential tool for trust-building - transparency which is considered "a function of information disclosure, clarity, and accuracy" (Schnackenberg and Tomlinson, 2014). Any organization, especially those which are recently launched and experienced rapid growth, is recommended to have a transparency strategy, including concrete mechanisms to manage transparency perceptions and information for deliberate changes in transparency.

So, the NAQA decision was to develop the QA system based on openness, transparency, partnership, professionalism, trust (NAQA, 2019).

Results and Findings

The QA plays an important societal role and impacts Universities and the whole HE system. The QA Agencies' and networks' role is enhanced under emergency circumstances, and they demonstrate leadership, supportiveness and openness to ensure the same high level of education quality during pandemic (Stukalo, 2020). Its apparent positive communication is essential for relationships among stakeholders and building trustworthiness in the QA process.

The analysis of the NAQA questionnaire and the observation of the QA Networks websites have resulted in the following findings:

Firstly, the trustworthiness of the QA Agency starts with being approachable and friendly in communication with stakeholders. For instance, QA Networks and Agencies are easily reachable via social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn. According to the NAQA's recent experts survey, only 2% of respondents think communication with NAQA is problematic. NAQA was officially launched only in February 2019 and regularly monitored the stakeholders' satisfaction with NAQA communication. Experts surveys demonstrate that communication with NAQA has significantly improved within the last year. In December 2019, 11% of experts mentioned communication with NAQA as one of the problems in the QA process. In February 2020 – 7%, and in August 2020, only 2% of experts identified communication as a problem (NAQA, 2020).

Secondly, accountability and trustworthiness are based on honesty and openness. For example, the NAQA's fundamental values are trust, openness, reliability and

transparency (NAQA, 2019). The major NAQA's activities are transparent and final decisions on accreditation are made publicly. NAQA has established an online accreditation platform with a publicly available list of all accreditation decisions and suggestions for improvement (www.public.naqa.gov.ua). NAQA encourages open and honest dialogue among all participants of the external QA process and considers arguments.

Thirdly, the QA Agency's policy should be consistent, aligned to values and organizational culture. Keeping commitments and doing what you say is the basis of organizational culture and play a crucial role regarding confidence deserving. In the NAQA case, the accreditation process and communication strategy are built on the values presented in the strategy (NAQA, 2019). It is communicated to the public how decision-making reflects it.

Last but not least, showing support is decisive for trust maintaining, significantly when circumstances are changing in emergency times. In QA, support is reflected through explaining, suggesting, guiding. Covid-19 caused a lack of face-to-face communication, so QA Networks and Agencies have quickly switched to an online format in their procedures and communication. For instance, ENQA has conducted a series of webinars, INQAAHE's, CEENQA's, CHEA's thematic webinars have also become regular. In addition, NAQA has established such communication projects as NAQA School of Quality, NAQA_Recommends, NAQA_Comments, NAQA's Q&A Sessions, NAQA Webinars. These projects are conducted through social media on a weekly and biweekly basis and provide experts, universities representatives, and the other stakeholders with guidelines, recommendations, explanations, best practices sharing. 77% of respondents consider social media communication effective and use it regularly; 91% of respondents are mostly (36%) or entirely (55%) informed about the NAQA's activities and communication projects.

Implementing the policy of supportive communication and transparency has resulted in significant improvements in the quality assurance system in Ukraine. The analytical report resulting from the project supported by the OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine (Фініков і Терешук, 2020) confirms significant progress in internal quality assurance system in the Ukrainian Universities within two years after the NAQA's official launch.

Conclusions

The current practice is evidence of transparent, sustaining, and innovative ways of communication of QA institutions and networks towards the key stakeholders. Supportive communication is characterized by honesty, initiative, consistency, accountability, dedication and commitment. Such communication style is based on credibility, reliability and engenders the academic public's trust, which is imperative in emergencies. So, the study's main contribution lies in arguing QA Agencies supportive communication and transparency with stakeholders as a basis for maintaining trust in emerging QA systems and during emergency times. Social

media tools, webinars, Q&A sessions, open communication play a crucial role when distrust in society or face-to-face communication is not available. There is evidence that the value of trust, openness, transparency created an atmosphere of trust and understanding among the academic society - FIDES FACIT FIDEM (trust creates the trust).

The study could be helpful to QA Agencies, and the other stakeholders as the supportive communication framework could be implemented to maintain trust and build effective relationships. The limitation of this study is focused on the single organization– NAQA. It could be conducted in multiple case studies as an area for further research.

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