

# Review of APQN 2020 online forum entitled the COVID-19 impact on the quality assurance of higher education

**Title:**

APQN 2020 Online Forum of APQN

**Leader:**

I-Jung Grace Lu

**Authors:**

I-Jung Grace Lu Zhijie Xiang Panpan Huang

**Forum Commettii:**

Jianxin Zhang Galina Motova Jagannath Patil Deepthi Bandara I-Jung  
Grace Lu Farida Nurmanbetova Pingping Liu

**During:**

September 28, 2020

# Review of APQN 2020 online forum entitled the COVID-19 impact on the quality assurance of higher education

## Executive Summary

Education systems worldwide have been hit hard and abruptly by the COVID-19 pandemic. This article presents the review of the 8th APQN Online Forum and the six presentations given by the board directors of APQN. This article summarizes the event into three parts: the overview, actions of APQN, and discussion on the influence of COVID-19 on Quality Assurance. In the third part of the review, the discussion is divided into six sections: Regional Organization for Quality Assurance, Governments as the Key Players for Higher Education Quality Assurance, The new normal of internationalization of QA, Quality Education, Outcome-Based Teaching and Learning and Digitalization of Quality Assurance.

**Keywords:** Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN); Higher Education Quality Assurance; Online teaching

The COVID-19 pandemic has had unprecedented impacts on all countries of the world, especially in the higher education sectors. Student mobility, international research cooperation, and other academic development are limited by the closing of borders and transportation restrictions which are in place to control the outbreak of the pandemic among different countries. Experts, scholars, teachers, and students from all over the world gather through different "cloud forums" to discuss the possible solutions for this global issue. On July 27, 2020, APQN also set out and held the 8th APQN Online Forum to discuss COVID-19's impact on quality assurance of higher education and to highlight APQN's mission and shoulder its responsibility to fight the COVID-19 together with other agencies around the world. Overall, 32 representatives from 9 countries and regions around the world participated in the online forum through the Webex. This forum is hosted by APQN, led by Dr. I-Jung Grace Lu (from HEEACT), and co-organized by HEEACT. All board directors also facilitate different talks on various topics on the impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education, including the topic of the government as a key player for higher education, the new normal of internationalization of quality assurance (QA), outcome-based

teaching and learning, and digitization of QA. The following sections present an overview of the online forum.

Around 12 years ago, in 2008, the first APQN online forum was formed. The initiative of starting the online forum is to reduce general costs for all participants, such as travel expenses, to provide more equal opportunities for member agencies from different financial backgrounds to participate in the international forum and to work corporately with each other. This year due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, the APQN Academic Conference in Singapore was postponed until next year, and APQN Global Summit was also suspended. In this situation, the 8th on-line forum plays the critical role of providing an international platform to brainstorm, to discuss "the COVID-19 impact on the quality assurance of higher education", and to predict the "new normal of higher education 4.0" in the era of post-COVID-19 crisis.

## 1. Overview of the APQN online forum in 2020

At the beginning of the online forum, Prof. Jianxin Zhang, the 5th and 6th President of APQN made a simple opening ceremony. In the opening presentation, Prof. Jianxin Zhang elaborated on the damage COVID-19 has done to the quality assurance of higher education around the world and summarized the activities of APQN in fighting the pandemic. Since March this year, APQN, as the largest and most influential education quality assurance network in the Asia-Pacific Region, contributes to the world in its unique way.

After the brief opening ceremony, 6 APQN board members, Prof. Jianxin Zhang, Prof. Galina Motova, Dr. Jagannath Patil, Prof. Deepthi C. Bandara, Dr. Farida Nurmanbetova, and Dr. I-Jung Grace Lu gave presentations on the 6 sub-topics of the online forum respectively. Attendees expressed their views and insights, and the 6 board members' presentations stimulated heated discussion during the online forum.

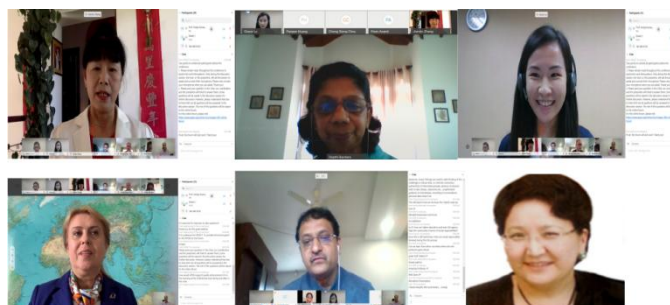


Figure 1 6 APQN board members share their views in the online forum

Experts and participants jointly discuss "How would APQN support the quality enhancement of on-line learning at the institutional level", "Will there be any guidelines on good practices for quality assuring online programs" and "online

external review experiences in the Asia Pacific region" and so on. Finally, under Dr. Jagannath Patil's summary, the 8th APQN Online Forum was successfully concluded.

## 2. The actions APQN took as the regional quality network

At the end of 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak shocked the world. This outbreak has been one of the most serious disasters since World War II. It has brought hitherto unknown impact to all countries /territories in the world<sup>[1]</sup>. As for higher education, almost overnight, the traditional face-to-face teaching was completely stopped, and all HEIs are now faced great challenges of carrying out quality education through alternative ways such as online teaching all of the sudden. Higher education and its quality assurance are facing a great challenge and reform opportunity, that has never been experienced before. Over the years, APQN has been committed to improving the quality of education in the Asia Pacific region and has made an outstanding contribution to the quality assurance of education in the Asia Pacific region. Thus, under the impact of COVID-19, it is APQN's responsibility to understand the influence of COVID-19 on Quality Assurance.

As a regional education cooperation organization composed of members from education quality assurance (QA) agency, educational evaluation and research units, and higher education institutions in the Asia-Pacific region, APQN has made full use of the regional communication platform in the past 12 years and holds regular academic seminars and online forum. Activities such as information dissemination, personnel training, subject research, and consulting services have effectively strengthened the exchanges and cooperation between education QA agencies in the Asia-Pacific region and effectively ensured the quality of education in the Asia-Pacific region. In the opening presentation of the APQN online forum, president Jianxin Zhang reported on APQN's progress in many aspects in the past year: Firstly, APQN survey of the COVID-19 impact on higher education institutions (HEIs), which got 1570 respondents; Secondly, APQN Survey of the COVID-19 impact on quality assurance agencies, which got 32 respondents; Thirdly, interview with APQN Board Directors on the COVID-19 impact on the HE quality. In response to participants' questions: "How would APQN support Quality Enhancement of online learning at the institutional level during and after in this crisis?" President Jianxin Zhang said that APQN is conducting a study on the effectiveness of online teaching and has received more than 4,600 responses. She pledged that all members of APQN would do their utmost to improve the quality of online teaching and contribute to the Asia-pacific region and the world.

### 3. Forum Discussions on the COVID influence to Quality Assurance

#### 3.1 Key players for HE quality assurance: governments

The governments in the Asia-Pacific Region, especially in Asia, have always been the key force to guide and influence higher education quality assurance. It is of great significance to explore the important role of the government in solving the COVID-19 crisis. In Prof. Jianxin Zhang's presentation, she uses the following three modes to describe governments' roles in quality assurance of higher education under the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic(Figure 2):

Government Mode	1. Government-Control Mode	2. Government-Supervision Mode	3. Government Non-action Mode
Government Measurements	government actively takes mandatory measures	Government takes preferential measures	government confirms law & the legal registration
Government Authority	government with strong authority, while HEIs are under its direct leadership	government authority is weaker, while academic authority is greater	government authority is absent, while academic authority is the largest.
Process	top-down	top-down combination	bottom-up
Characteristics	active	active	passive
Country Case	C.	U.	-

Figure 2 three modes to describe governments' roles in QA under the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Source: Jianxin Zhang. Government as Key Players for Higher Education Quality Assurance under the Impact of COVID-19 [Z]. Presentation at the 8th APQN Online Forum 2020,2020-07-27.

1) Government-Control Mode. Its characteristic is a top-down process, in which the government actively takes mandatory measurements, such as administrative orders and laws. The government has strong authority while universities are under the government's direct leadership, and China is a typical example.

2) Government-Supervision Mode. Its characteristic is a process of top-down-combination process, the governments propagandize, take preferential and flexible measures. The authority of the government is weak, and its regulation of universities is in-direct, while the authority of university presidents, academic groups, and professors is greater, and the USA is a typical example;

3) Government Non-action Mode. Its characteristic is a bottom-up process, the governments confirm law and the legal registration. The authority of the government is passive and even absent, and its regulation of universities is in the background, while the authority of university president, academic groups, and professors is larger.

In her opinion, no country matches this mode<sup>[1]</sup>.

Thomas Friedman believes that the COVID-19 Pandemic will become “our new historical divide: B.C. and A.C.” We all know that after COVID-19, the role of the government has changed. This change requires our attention.

### 3.2 Digitization of quality assurance: the new normal for QA

Nowadays use of the digital technologies is an integral part of the activities of many Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (QAA). The higher education institutions have canceled all face-to-face classes and moved their courses on-line. The most significant challenges currently facing higher education institutions are how they can continue to provide quality education to students during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the student instruction and counseling for effective student academic and mental health support.

According to recently published Reports, Survey's findings and conclusions shared experiences and panel discussions on the Webinars of the International Organizations, Associations, and Networks in Quality Assurance in Higher Education the threat of COVID-19 has presented the challenges for QAAs that are common for all of them. Dr. Farida Nurmanbetova’s presentation is focused on the new approaches and values, the practical implication of the digital technologies in external quality assurance, and consideration of how Quality Assurance Agencies use these technologies to appropriately respond to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 outbreak. Due to the threat of COVID-19, higher education institutions are facing challenges on how to continue teaching and learning while keeping their faculty, staff, and student's safety and well-being during this difficult time (figure 3).

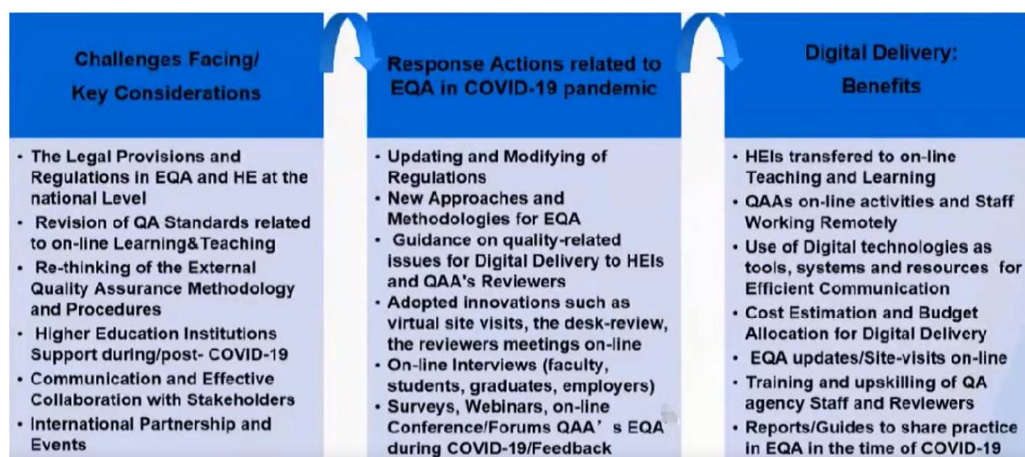


Figure 3 how Quality Assurance Agencies use these technologies to appropriately respond to the challenges

Source: Farida Nurmanbetova. Speech Digitalization of quality assurance: will this be the new normal for QA? [Z]. Presentation at the 8th APQN Online Forum

[1] Jianxin Zhang. Government as Key Players for Higher Education Quality Assurance under the Impact of COVID-19. Presentation at the 8th APQN Online Forum 2020,2020-07-27.

2020,2020-07-27.

The digital environment will remain a crucial aspect of the 'new normal' and how quality is maintained is an important discussion. There is a possibility that a hybrid approach to Quality Assurance would become normal in the future. We need to carefully evaluate how the performance of HEIs after an on-line site-visit compares to HEIs performance after standard QA procedure. It is possible that analysis and comparison of them would guide us to areas of QA that could be done on-line without negatively affecting the result, or even provide better results. This is an important area to focus on at the moment<sup>[2]</sup>.

However, even if we go back to standard Quality Assurance procedures, we need to analyze if there are ways of improving them using our online experiences. More evidence and its analysis are needed for a more precise answer.

### 3.3 The new normal of internationalization of QA: Opportunities and Challenges

Prof. Jagannath Patil mentioned in "Reflections on new Normal and strategies for quality assurance in emerging out of COVID-19 pandemic": "How to ensure internationalization with the flow of ideas and trust in the times of closed borders?"<sup>[3]</sup> It is hard to discuss the internationalization of higher education and quality assurance when the borders of the countries and the doors of Higher Education Institutions are closed. As Prof. Galina Motova said: "The principles of internationalization are openness, transparency, and trust. These principles facilitated integration processes in higher education. They brought about the establishment of Higher Education Institutions networks, mobility of students and staff, delivery of double diplomas and joint programs."<sup>[4]</sup>

In QA the processes of internationalization have called to existence QA networks: the INQAHE global network, the regional networks APQN, ENQA, and others. They started international cooperation and initiatives between Quality Assurance Agencies: bilateral agreements, exchange of experts and joint accreditation, staff exchange, and internships. Trust of Quality Assurance Agencies to each other is a condition for the effectiveness of internationalization tools: recognition of QA results and accreditation decisions, and in general – recognition of the quality of the National Higher Education.

Currently affected by the pandemic, many QA tasks need to be performed

<sup>[2]</sup> Farida Nurmanbetova. Speech Digitalization of quality assurance: will this be the new normal for QA?. Presentation at the 8th APQN Online Forum 2020,2020-07-27.

<sup>[3]</sup> Jagannath Patil. Reflections on new normal and strategies for quality assurance in emerging out of COVID-19 pandemic [Z]. Presentation at the 8th APQN Online Forum 2020,2020-07-27.

<sup>[4]</sup> Galina Motova. The new normal of internationalization of Quality Assurance. Presentation at the 8th APQN Online Forum 2020,2020-07-27.

online, the obvious plus in this situation is the increase in communication, exchange of experience, carrying out surveys, webinars, and online conferences with speakers from any part of the globe. All these serve as an international think tank in the current situation. But the key questions remain: How could we help the Higher Education Institutions preserve and enhance the quality of online education? And how could we help agencies to ensure the quality of external review of new forms of delivery? These issues need to be further explored.

### 3.4 Quality Education: Sustainability and Equity

Quality has always been the core of education. Entire humanity and all aspects of life have been undergoing unprecedented challenges setting new normal during each passing day during the COVID-19 crisis, and education, quality assurance, and networking are also highly impacted by the pandemic. The pandemic abruptly disrupted implementation towards many of the Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs] and, in some cases, turned back decades of progress. Education systems worldwide have been hit hard and abruptly by the pandemic. It is adversely affecting learning outcomes and the social and behavioral development of children and youth. Several alternative strategies are being explored to counter barriers and bring the situation back on track. Digital and virtual activities are replacing face to face ones where one of the most possible options. This, however, has brought in new challenges of inequalities among those who own digital resources and those who do not. As Prof. Jagannath Patil asked in his presentation “How to address quality issues amidst barriers like inequalities ?”

In response to these challenges and questions, Dr. I-Jung Grace Lu discussed how online education can still be quality assured and how the HEIs can rethink the ways to provide their teaching more sustainably. She also discussed how having equal access to such digital resources can be essential to fulfill equity for all students.

The focus of the quality assurance process still very similar to the traditional ones, including setting educational goals, reviewing its online program design and development, examining the digital infrastructure and learning resources, and also reviewing the learning outcome. (Figure 4). The accreditation process also needs to be reviewed and re-established. For example, a lot of QA agencies have been using the online desk review and even carrying out a virtual site visit long before the outbreak of the pandemic. It is important to carry forward the good practices of the past of using these techniques but to also rethink more innovative ways to make these practices even more efficient and beneficial to the HEIs. Since different from the previous digital experience in QA, not only the HEIs but also the QA agencies are forced to carry out the accreditation process almost “fully virtual” due to the outbreak.





Figure 4 the essential elements required for quality education

Source: I-Jung Grace Lu. Innovations in HE accreditation in an era of disruptive technologies [Z]. Presentation at the 8th APQN Online Forum 2020,2020-07-27.

Besides the process of quality assurance, Dr. Lu also stresses the important role the QA agencies can play during this pandemic crisis through online platforms and pathways. For example, holding webinars and training courses online for all the HEIs to enhance their capacity and create an online hub where they can share their experience. Through these practices, internal quality assurance (IQA) mechanism and a wholistic feedback system can be established. Capacity-building among the staff members and also support network can also be set up digitally through active discussion and action online. <sup>[5]</sup>. Dr. Lu also concluded by readdressing the potential limitation and challenges of the current situation and environment for the HEIs and QAAs. The challenges for establishing sustainable and fair quality education are the limitation of facility, technology literacy, and the lack of motivation to participate in such an online process. So for the future, the HEIs and QAAs will need to consider other potential reforms that can improve the system, such as the hybrid system.

### 3.5 Quality Assurance: Outcome-Based Teaching and Learning

Outcomes are defined as something that follows as a result or consequence. Hence students' learning outcomes are described as "written statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to do at the end of a period of learning" (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (2010)). It is an essential feature that needs to be ensured in effective teaching/learning scenarios<sup>[6]</sup>. Therefore, university administrators, program coordinators, and teachers have to define outcomes as performance/s in stipulated conditions for an expected

<sup>[5]</sup> I-Jung Grace Lu. Innovations in HE accreditation in an era of disruptive technologies. Presentation at the 8th APQN Online Forum 2020,2020-07-27.

<sup>[6]</sup> Deepthi C. Bandara. Quality assurance of outcome-based teaching and learning: the influence of COVID-19. Presentation at the 8th APQN Online Forum 2020,2020-07-27.

standard. In assuring the quality of such outcomes many aspects need consideration. In the current context of the influence of COVID-19, this becomes even more challenging since when HEIs confer qualifications on their students it is a declaration that such outcomes were achieved. In this scenario, it is inevitable that both teachers and learners make extra effort to achieve the outcomes. This, of course, would have to be supported by HEI administrations. In the presentation entitled "Quality Assurance of Outcome-Based Teaching and Learning: the influence of COVID-19" by Prof. Dr. Deepthi C. Bandara, she presents a three-pronged approach involving administrators, teachers and students would be necessary to ensure the learning outcome of the students (Table 1).

Table 1 What do they need to do for outcome-based teaching & learning

Main body	Elements for outcome-based Teaching/Learning
<b>administrators</b>	Ensure the safety and health of teachers and students
	Pivot to online provision for all courses
	Set up Incident management team
	Creation of a resource base and support plan
	Establish an institutional communication strategy
<b>teachers</b>	Retain same learning outcomes
	New Teaching/Learning paradigm
	Space and time Other teaching fronts
	Technological tools
	Students as co-creators of knowledge
	5 pillars- master classes, teaching teams, SCL, diversification of content, mentoring
	Assessment-online "Safety net" for student outcomes
<b>students</b>	A new paradigm of "timeless learning"
	Quick access to digital technology
	Feedback analyzed convey
	Engagement with each other

Source: Deepthi C. Bandara. Quality assurance of outcome-based teaching and learning: the influence of COVID-19 [Z]. Presentation at the 8th APQN Online Forum 2020, 2020-07-27.

Before COVID-19, many countries have clearly stated the descriptors based on learning outcomes for each level of education. These learning outcome descriptors in higher education are then used as indicators and standards of higher education QA. The assessment strategies of higher education are the rational basis to check the achievement of learning outcomes. Thus, the influence of COVID-19 has posed new challenges in achieving the outcomes and to assure their quality.

## Summary

At present, the global pandemic is not over. The global village, the international community should continue to fight the pandemic together as “One” -- with a commonly shared future, to further strengthen national co-operations, to work together to overcome the COVID-19 crisis, and to jointly build a new model of higher education 4.0. for our better future. For APQN, the responsibility for all HEIs in the region, even the world, remains: How could we help the HEIs preserve and enhance the quality of online education? And how could we help agencies to ensure the quality of external review of new forms of delivery? Here standing at the end of the 2020 APQN online forum, we look forward to a brighter future, together, and for all.