



Final Report

APQN Survey on the Influence of COVID-19 on Quality Assurance Agencies

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Introduction

The education system like many other spheres faced unprecedented challenges in the times of crisis. When it became clear that COVID-19 was spreading fast throughout the world, countries rang the alarm and started to close enterprises, schools and universities. Within several weeks tens of thousands of higher education institutions (HEIs) ceased their regular activities and sent hundreds of millions of students home, many of whom switched to online classes. Universities and colleges were urged to migrate to the unknown work mode and spend a significant amount of money on transfer to online studies. All over the world HEIs cancelled international travels and exchange programmes that led to the halt of research. Many of them faced the problem of learning outcomes assessment, cancellation or postponement of graduation exams, and applicants' admission for the next academic year.

National education authorities too experienced complicated problems concerning stabilization of the educational process in HEIs; and quality assurance agencies (QAAs) had the issues with maintaining the education quality. The following two issues require an early resolution in times of isolation: how to maintain quality of educational programmes delivery and educational process in whole, and how to provide quality of the review and accreditation of higher education institutions and programmes.

On March 26, 2020 the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) published a statement on COVID-19 pandemic, where peculiarities of work of the association and accreditation agencies during the pandemic are explained. ENQA encourages its members 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.

The associations of accreditation agencies (INQAAHE, ENQA, APQN, CHEA) have also committed to help their members to keep their activities and have shown good practices using the opportunities of the Internet (webinars, online conferences). Such a support is especially important for those agencies whose sources of financing are accreditation and project activities. It is necessary to not only maintain the education quality, periodicity and quality of accreditation procedures, but to keep the staff of accreditation agencies.

In May APQN initiated a project on studying practices and possible approaches to maintaining activities of accreditation agencies and HEIs in the time of COVID-19. As a participant of this project NCPA developed and delivered a survey of QAAs of the Pacific region and European countries.



34 European agencies
responded to the survey



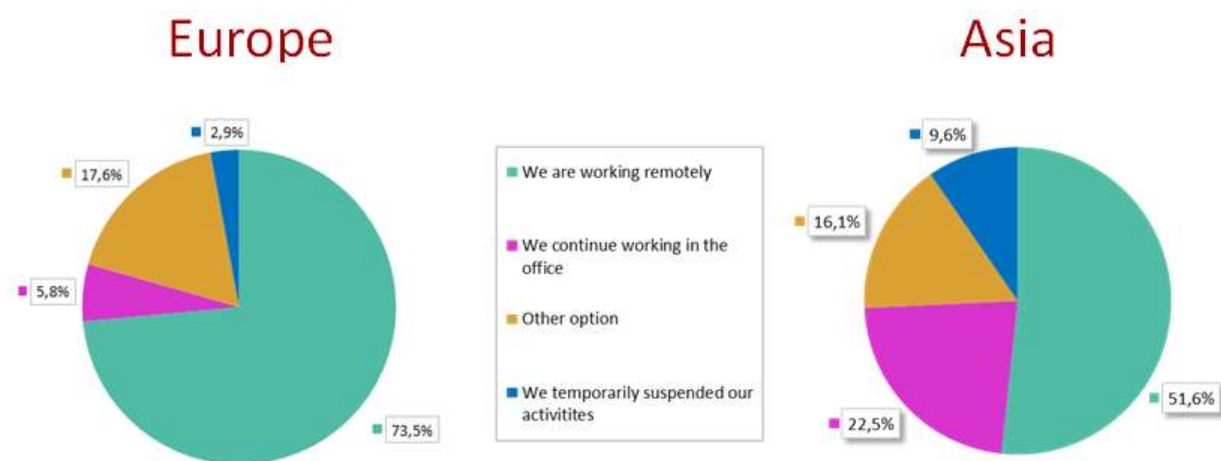
32 Asian agencies
responded to the survey

A questionnaire containing a list of questions on agencies' activities during the pandemic was developed for the study. Multiple choices as well as own responses were available for each of the questions. The outcomes are presented in tables and diagrams. The findings were a basis for a more thorough analysis of the agencies' performance. The survey was sent to 62 European (ENQA and CEENQA members) and 71 Asian QAAs (APQN members). 34 European and 32 Asian agencies responded to the survey. Since only a half of the participants responded to the survey, the obtained results cannot be considered comprehensive. However, the survey gave an opportunity to make certain conclusions about the possibilities of maintenance and development, advantages and disadvantages of the current working conditions.

Results of the Survey

1. Impact of COVID-19 on the work of QAAs

Since offline activities became impossible, the majority of the organizations switched to online work, and quality assurance agencies were not an exception. The results of the survey show that more than a half of the institutions are working remotely (73.5% - Europe, 51,6% - Asia). Some have combined office hours and remote work, and a few temporarily suspended their activities.



Europe

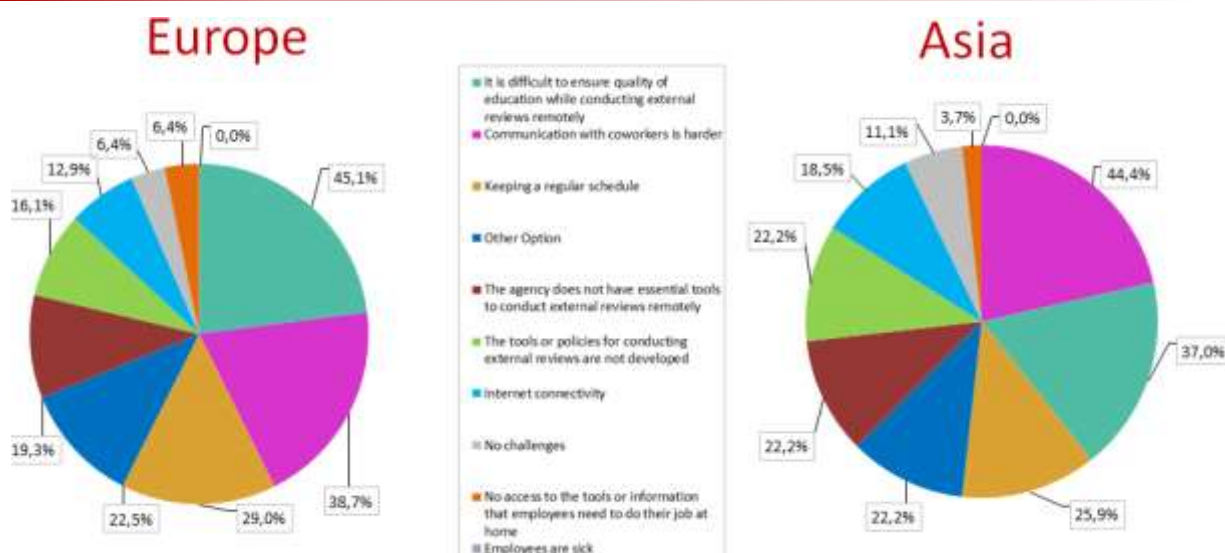
Options	Responses	Percentage
We are working remotely	25	73.5%
Other option	6	17.6%
We continue working in the office	2	5.8%
We temporarily suspended our activities	1	2.9%

Asia

Options	Responses	Percentage
We are working remotely	16	51.6%
We continue working in the office	7	22.5%
Other option	5	16.1%
We temporarily suspended our activities	3	9.6%

2. The biggest challenges QAAs are currently facing

The agencies were asked about the biggest challenges they face when working remotely, and most of them noted that it is difficult to ensure quality of education while conducting external reviews remotely (45,1% - Europe, 37% - Asia) and communication with coworkers became harder (38,7% - Europe, 44,4% - Asia). The participants also reported that the tools and technologies became an issue. Only three institutions in total noted that they do not face any challenges while working remotely.

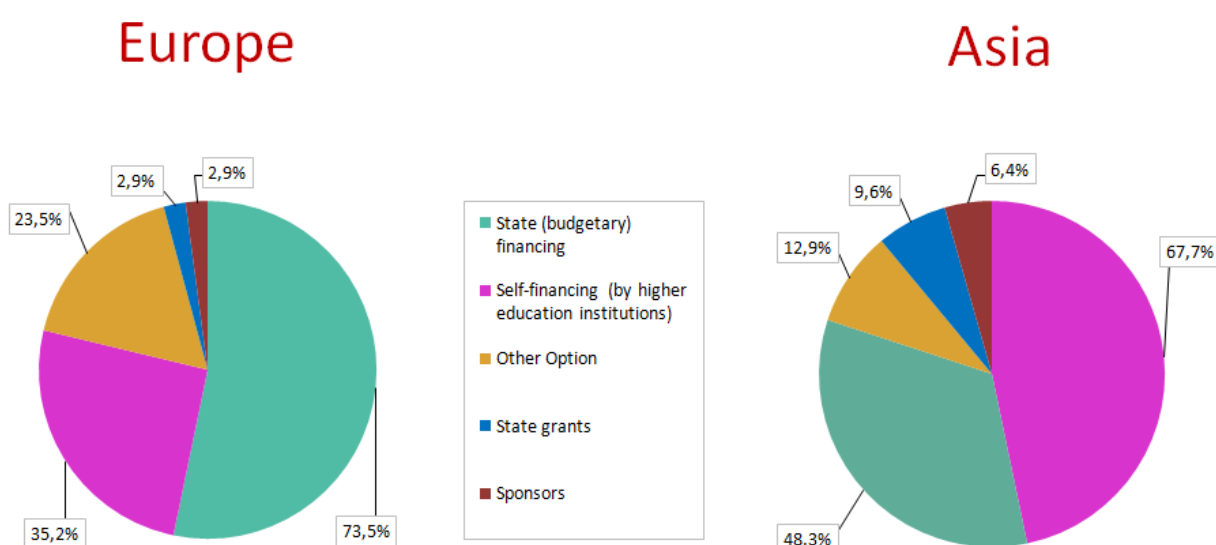


The answers to the “other options” included:

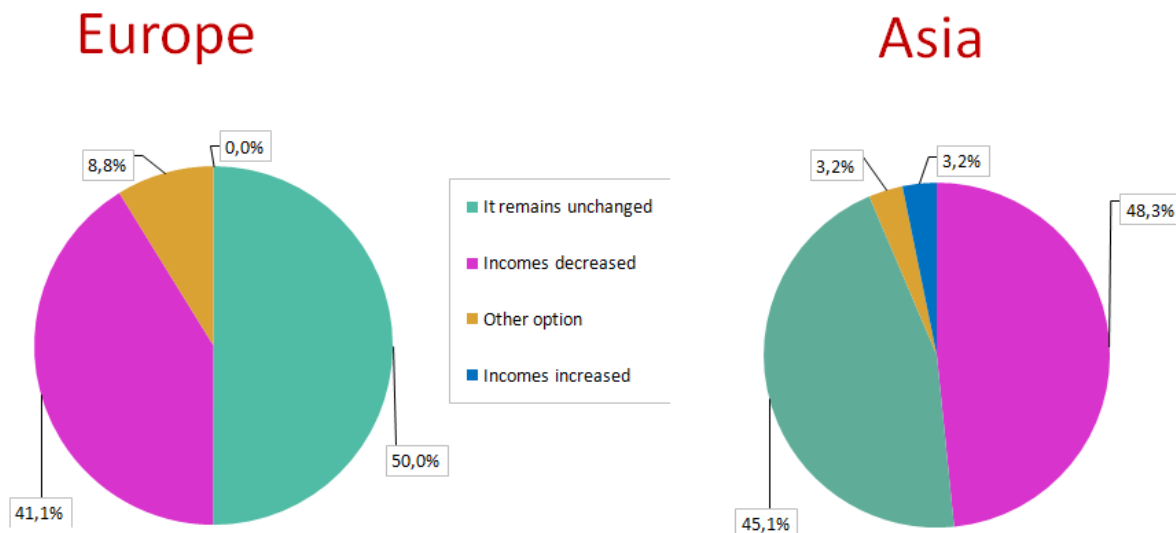
- enabling all stakeholders to participate;
- no external review is conducted at the moment;
- national regulations require site visits;
- in some cases on-line site visits are used;
- preparation for the site-visit is more time-consuming and there are elements which are difficult to be assessed remotely, for example, resources;
- educational organizations suspended their self-assessment during quarantine;
- we are working more than schedules.

3. Impact of COVID-19 on the financial sustainability of QAAs

In order to understand the impact of the virus on the financial sustainability of the agencies, they were asked about the sources of financing. Most of the European respondents are state financed (73,5%) and most of the Asian providers are self-financing (67,7%).

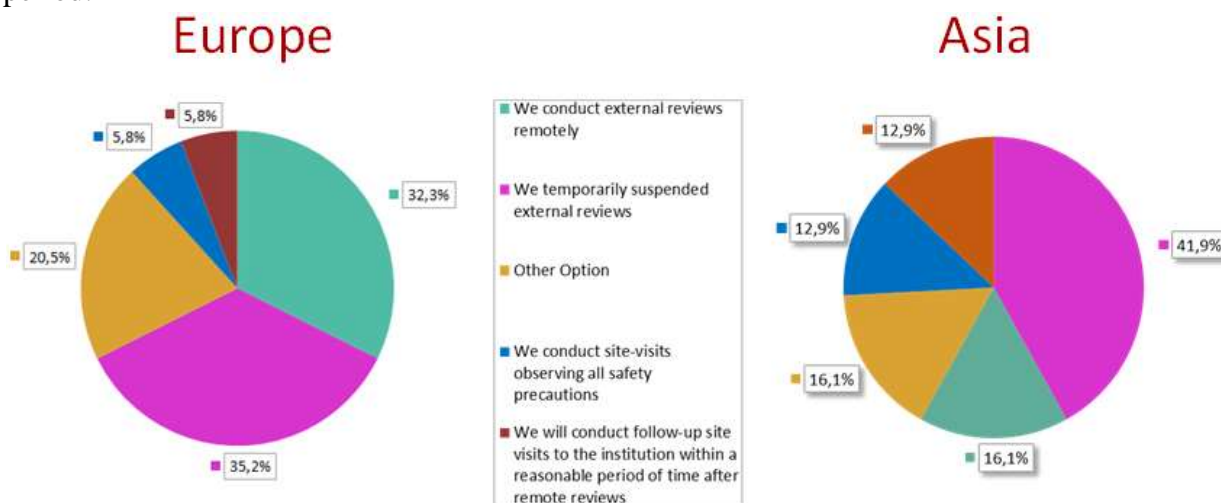


As many events were cancelled and activities of the agencies were restricted, the virus influenced their financial sustainability. For the majority of European providers the incomes remained unchanged (50% - Europe, 45,1% - Asia), and for most of the Asian institutions the incomes decreased (41,1% - Europe, 48,3% - Asia). One of the Asian providers noted that the incomes even increased during the pandemic.



4. Ways of conducting external reviews in the current situation

Accreditation of higher education institutions requires site-visits, which became impossible due to the restrictions, and online site-visits are more complicated in organization, which is why most of the agencies temporarily suspended external reviews (35,2% - Europe, 41,9% - Asia), while others decided to conduct the reviews remotely (32,3% - Europe, 16,1% - Asia). Some of the agencies will conduct follow-up site visits to the institution within a reasonable period of time after remote reviews (5,8% - Europe, 12,9% - Asia). The general answer for the “other option” was that some external reviews are conducted remotely (for example, those that do not require international experts) and some are postponed for a safer period.



Europe

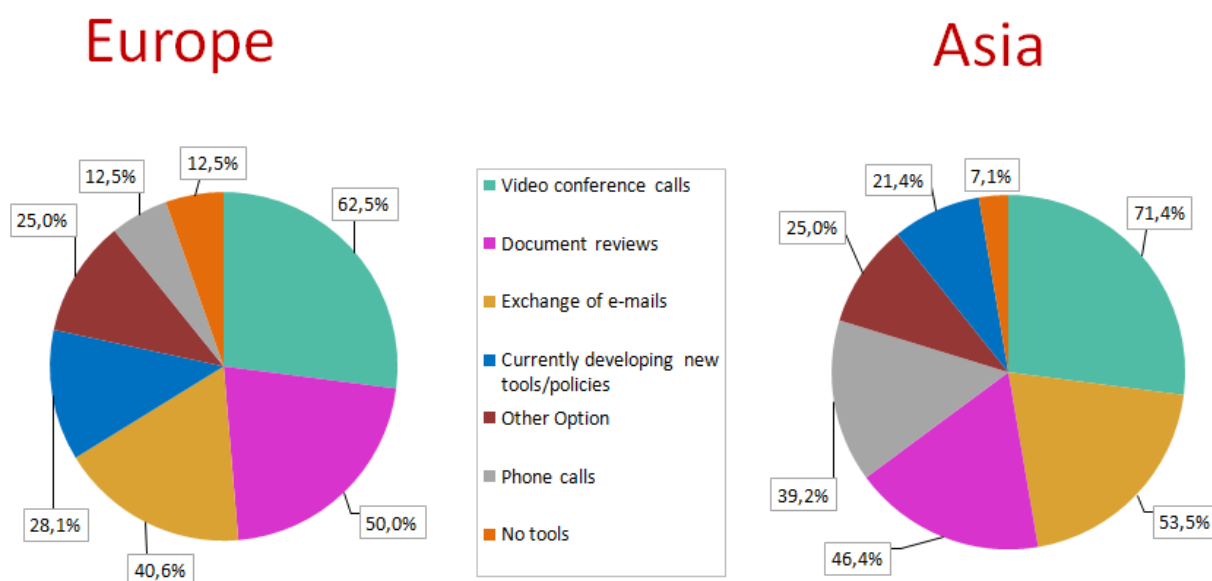
Options	Responses	Percentage
We temporarily suspended external reviews	12	35.2%
We conduct external reviews remotely	11	32.3%
Other option	7	20.5%
We conduct site-visits observing all safety precautions	2	5.8%
We will conduct follow-up site-visits to the institution within a reasonable period of time after remote reviews	2	5.8%

Asia

Options	Responses	Percentage
We temporarily suspended external reviews	13	41.9%
We conduct external reviews remotely	5	16.1%
Other option	5	16.1%
We conduct site-visits observing all safety precautions	4	12.9%
We will conduct follow-up site-visits to the institution within a reasonable period of time after remote reviews	4	12.9%

5. Tools for conducting external reviews remotely used by QAAs

Modern technologies have become a great solution to the problem of conducting external reviews in the current conditions. The agencies use video conference calls, e-mails, document reviews, phone calls, and a few have developed new tools and policies. Others do not employ any tools as they temporarily suspended external reviews. As for the “other option” section, agencies hold web-conferences of peers/experts before the session with a HEI and are thinking on the options for the future.



Europe

Options	Responses	Percentage
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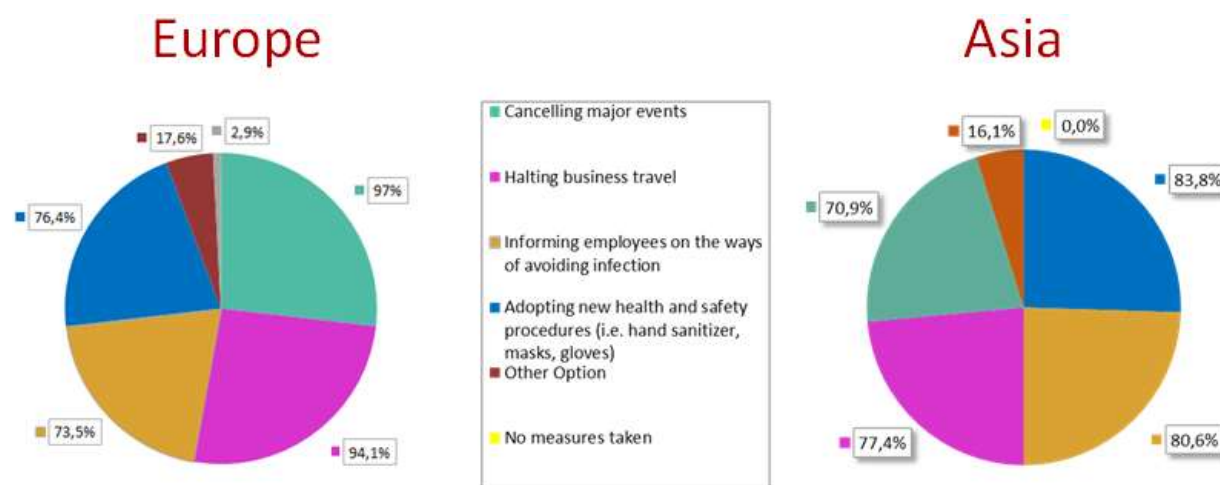
Video conference calls	20	62.5%
Document reviews	16	50%
Exchange of e-mails	13	40.6%
Currently developing new tools/policies	9	28.1%
Other option	8	25%
Phone calls	4	12.5%
No tools	4	12.5%

Asia

Options	Responses	Percentage
Video conference calls	20	71.4%
Exchange of e-mails	15	53.5%
Document reviews	13	46.4%
Phone calls	11	39.2%
Other option	7	25%
Currently developing new tools/policies	6	21.4%
No tools	2	7.1%

6. Measures taken by QAAs to cope with the challenges

When organizations were asked about the measures they take to cope with the challenges, almost all of them answered that they cancelled major events, which, obviously, cannot be held in the current situation. Agencies additionally inform their employees on the ways of avoiding infection, halt business travel and adopt new health and safety precautions (i.e. hand sanitizer, masks, gloves), provide staff with the office computer equipment. Some respondents also mentioned remote work as a way of coping with the issues.



Europe

Options	Responses	Percentage
Cancelling major events	33	97%

Halting business travel	32	94.1%
Adopting new health and safety procedures (i.e. hand sanitizer, masks, gloves)	26	76.4%
Informing employees on the ways of avoiding infection	25	73.5%
Other option	6	17.6%
No measures taken	1	2.9%

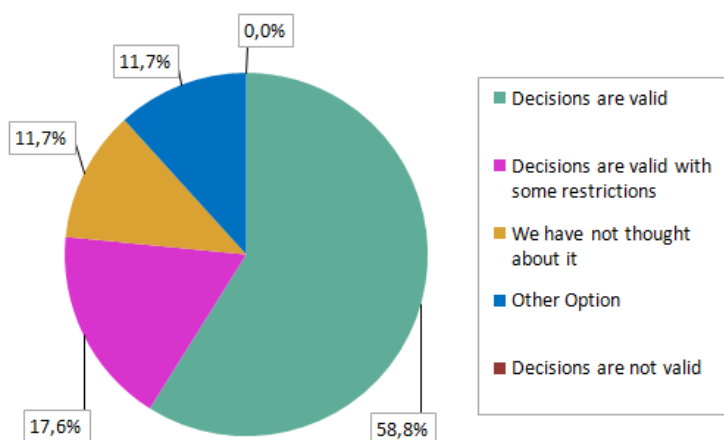
Asia

Options	Responses	Percentage
Adopting new health and safety procedures (i.e. hand sanitizer, masks, gloves)	26	83.8%
Informing employees on the ways of avoiding infection	25	80.6%
Halting business travel	24	77.4%
Cancelling major events	22	70.9%
Other option	5	16.1%
No measures taken	0	0%

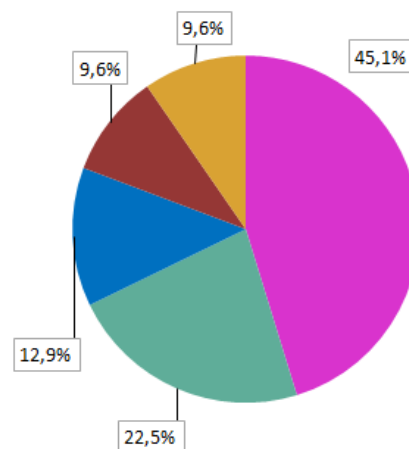
7. Status of accreditation decisions made remotely during COVID-19 outbreak

Ensuring quality of education while conducting external reviews remotely has become the biggest problem for the agencies. This raises the question of whether the accreditation decisions made remotely are valid. More than a half of the European agencies (58.8%) consider them valid, while Asian agencies consider them valid with some restrictions (45,1%). Those who chose the “*other option*” noted that they do not make any decisions as external reviews are not conducted.

Europe



Asia



Europe

Options	Responses	Percentage
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Decisions are valid	20	58.8%
Decisions are valid with some restrictions	6	17.6%
We have not thought about it	4	11.7%
Other option	4	11.7%
Decisions are not valid	0	0%

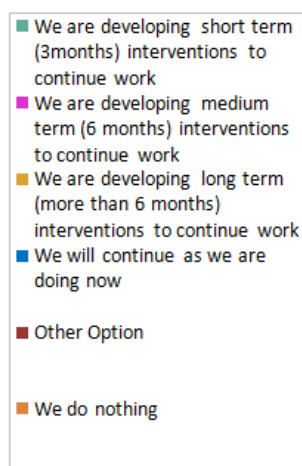
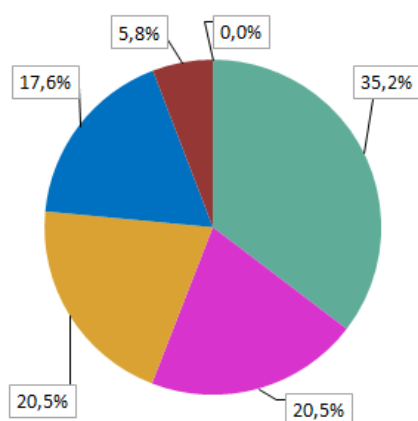
Asia

Options	Responses	Percentage
Decisions are valid with some restrictions	14	45.1%
Decisions are valid	7	22.5%
Other option	4	12.9%
Decisions are not valid	3	9.6%
We have not thought about it	3	9.6%

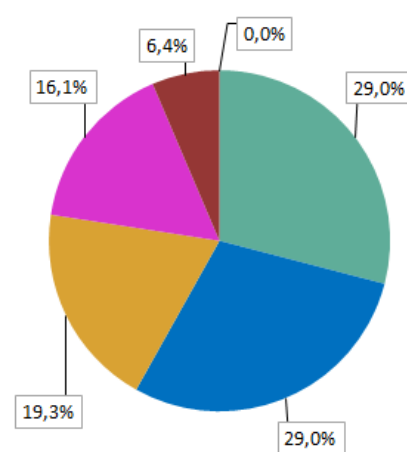
8. QAAs plans in case the impact of COVID-19 goes beyond 3 months

The agencies were also asked about their plans for the future in case if the impact of COVID-19 goes beyond 3 months from the time changes were implemented in the agency. The majority noted that they are developing short term (3months) interventions to continue work (35,2% - Europe, 29% - Asia). Some will continue as they are doing now, others are developing medium and long term interventions to continue work. One of the agencies is developing short term (almost weekly) interventions to continue work following the government decisions.

Europe



Asia



Europe

Options	Responses	Percentage
We are developing short term (3 months) interventions to continue work	12	35.2%
We are developing medium term (6 months) interventions to	7	20.5%

continue work		
We are developing long term (more than 6 months) interventions to continue work	7	20.5%
We will continue as we are doing now	6	17.6%
Other option	2	5.8%
We do nothing	0	0%

Asia

Options	Responses	Percentage
We are developing short term (3 months) interventions to continue work	9	29%
We will continue as we are doing now	9	29%
We are developing long term (more than 6 months) interventions to continue work	6	19.3%
We are developing medium term (6 months) interventions to continue work	5	16.1%
Other option	2	6.4%
We do nothing	0	0%

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has become a challenge that no one could expect and no one had time to prepare for. Quality assurance agencies have been forced to quickly switch to online accreditation. It has resulted in new issues and the use of other methods and tools to carry out evaluation activities. The main problem is that it is more difficult to conduct external reviews in the current situation as it is time-consuming, requires a lot of preliminary work, and offline site-visits, which give a lot of information about a HEI, cannot be conducted. The quality of the review heavily depends on technologies and equipment (Internet, quality of connection). There is also a risk of decline in demand for accreditation procedures due to economic consequences of the pandemic. Another matter of concern is whether online accreditation would be used in the future and whether accreditation decisions made during the pandemic would be considered fully valid as they were considered before the virus outbreak. However, the situation does not have only negative consequences. The survey shows that the majority of QAAs managed the situation quite successfully despite all negative consequences. Modern technologies allowed agencies to continue their activities, though in a completely different way. The whole situation could lead to some changes in the sphere of quality assurance, and the tools that are currently used by the agencies could be also applied in the future.

Annex: APQN Survey on the Influence of COVID-19 on Quality Assurance Agencies

- 1. Name of your agency.**
- 2. What was the impact of COVID-19 on the work of your agency?**
 - We continue working in the office;
 - We temporarily suspended our activities;
 - We are working remotely;
 - Other option.
- 3. If you are working remotely, what are the biggest challenges your agency is currently facing? (multiple)**
 - The agency does not have essential tools to conduct external reviews remotely;
 - It is difficult to ensure quality of education while conducting external reviews remotely;
 - The tools or policies for conducting external reviews are not developed;
 - No access to the tools or information that employees need to do their job at home;
 - Employees are sick;
 - Communication with coworkers is harder;
 - Internet connectivity;
 - Keeping a regular schedule;
 - No challenges;
 - Other Option.
- 4. What are the sources of financing of your agency? (multiple)**
 - State (budgetary) financing;
 - Self-financing (by higher education institutions);
 - State grants;
 - Sponsors;
 - Other option.
- 5. What was the impact of COVID-19 on the financial sustainability of your agency?**
 - It remains unchanged;
 - Incomes decreased;
 - Incomes increased;
 - Other option.
- 6. How does your agency conduct external reviews in the current situation?**
 - We conduct site-visits observing all safety precautions;
 - We will conduct follow-up site visits to the institution within a reasonable period of time after remote reviews;

- We conduct external reviews remotely;
 - We temporarily suspended external reviews;
 - Other option.
- 7. What tools does your agency employ while conducting external reviews remotely? (multiple)**
- Phone calls;
 - Video conference calls;
 - Document reviews;
 - Exchange of e-mails;
 - Currently developing new tools/policies;
 - No tools;
 - Other option.
- 8. What measures does your agency take to cope with the challenges? (multiple)**
- Informing employees on the ways of avoiding infection;
 - Adopting new health and safety procedures (i.e. hand sanitizer, masks, gloves);
 - Cancelling major events;
 - Halting business travel;
 - No measures taken;
 - Other option.
- 9. What do you think of accreditation decisions made remotely during COVID-19 outbreak?**
- Decisions are valid;
 - Decisions are valid with some restrictions;
 - Decisions are not valid;
 - We have not thought about it;
 - Other option.
- 10. In the situation when the impact of COVID-19 goes beyond 3 months from the time changes were implemented in your agency, what are your plans?**
- We are developing short term (3months) interventions to continue work;
 - We are developing medium term (6 months) interventions to continue work;
 - We are developing long term (more than 6 months) interventions to continue work;
 - We will continue as we are doing now;
 - We do nothing;
 - Other option.