



**NEAQA** Serbia

National Entity for Accreditation and  
Quality Assurance in Higher Education

**Report on the work of the NEAQA during the state of  
emergency**

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Belgrade

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## **1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS**

In accordance with the circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in the territory of the Republic of Serbia, and in the context of the adopted Decision on declaring a state of emergency ("Official Gazette of RS", No. 29/2020), the National Entity for Accreditation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education (NEAQA) continued to perform all tasks within its jurisdiction during the state of emergency. Meetings of the Management Board (MB) and the Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance (CAQA) were held electronically, while the employees of the NEAQA worked remotely. The peer-review panels continued their work on reviewing submitted accreditation requests of higher educational institutions (HEI) and study programs and preparing preliminary review reports. During the state of emergency visits to HEIs were suspended and announced trainings were canceled. NEAQA prepared and delivered video training material to the reviewers.

During the state of emergency, HEIs that had prepared the appropriate documentation could electronically submit accreditation requests of HEI and/or study programs, file an appeal against a decision of rejection, respond to a warning note or opinion, and complete the accreditation request upon conclusion of irregularity of the request. Support was constantly provided to the institutions - users of the NEAQA2019 software, by e-mailing the addresses available in the "Help > Customer support" section in the software.

The public was regularly informed about all measures and changes in the work of the NEAQA.

## **2. SUBMISSION OF ACCREDITATION REQUEST DURING THE STATE OF EMERGENCY**

Due to the state of emergency and the cessation of work of the office of the Administration for Commons affairs in the Palace of "Serbia", the NEAQA enabled HEIs, which wished to submit an application for accreditation of an HEI and/or study program, to initiate the accreditation procedure electronically, by sending a scanned request with proof of paying the accreditation fee to the address office@nat.rs and submitting the supporting documents; a) by sending a link to download files or b) via an internet service for sending and downloading files (e.g. WeTransfer, pCloud Transfer, BayFiles, etc.), while the Decision on declaring a state of emergency ("Official Gazette of the RS", no 29/2020) was in effect.

The HEI - the applicant was obliged to submit the original request in paper form to NEAQA before the end of the procedure, i.e. immediately after the state of emergency was lifted. The date of submission of the application was considered to be the date of sending the scanned application by email.

The HEIs that had prepared the appropriate documentation, could under the same conditions: 1) file an appeal against the decision on rejection of the accreditation request, 2) respond to a warning note or opinion, 3) complete the accreditation request upon conclusion of irregularity of the request, and 4) submit the requested information and documentation to the peer-review panel and statements about the peer-review panel's report.

Where the conditions were met, NEAQA continued to process accreditation requests of HEI and study programs during the state of emergency, while respecting the measures set by the Government of the Republic of Serbia in accordance with the Decision on declaring a state of emergency.

Following requests were submitted electronically during the state of emergency: one request for initial accreditation of an HEI and study programs, seven accreditation requests of HEI and 69 accreditation requests of study programs.

In order to efficiently process submitted accreditation requests during the state of emergency, and in accordance with Article 9, paragraph 2 of the Rulebook on Standards and Procedure for the accreditation of HEIs, Rulebook on standards for initial accreditation of HEIs and study programs, i.e. the Rulebook on standards and procedure for accreditation of study programs ("Official Gazette RS", number 13/2019), the work of peer-review panels was organized as follows:

1. After receiving the documentation by e-mail, the peer-review panel has a deadline of 30 days to make a preliminary review report and submit it to the coordinator of the peer-review panel from the NEAQA Secretariat.
2. Along with the preliminary review report, the panel submits to the coordinator also a list of documentation, information and everything else essential for the accreditation process, that the HEI is required to provide before the visit.
3. The coordinator of the peer-review panel submits by e-mail the said list to the HEI, which is required to provide the documentation within 10 days of receiving the request, in accordance with Article 2, Paragraph 2 of the Regulation on Application of Deadlines in Administrative Procedures for during the state of emergency ("Official Gazette of RS", no. 41/20 and 43/20).
4. Immediately upon receipt, the coordinator of the peer-review panel forwards documentation, information and everything else to the panel submitted by the HEI.
5. Based on the additional documentation and other information received from HEI, the peer-review panel draws up a draft of the final report, which he submits to the coordinator of the panel.
6. The visit to the HEI will take place after the end of the state of emergency, i.e. when the conditions are met, after which the peer-review panel draws up a final report and forwards it to the coordinator of the panel, who delivers it to the HEI. The HEI may submit any possible remarks on the facts stated in the report within 15 days from the date of delivery.

### **3. DEADLINES IN ACCREDITATION PROCEDURES DURING THE STATE OF EMERGENCY**

In accordance with Article 53, paragraph 6 of the Law on Higher Education ("Official Gazette of the RS", no. 88/2017, 27/2018-doctoral laws, 73/2018, 67/2019 and 6/2020-doctoral laws), the deadline for submission of request for a new accreditation of a HEI, i.e. study program is no later than one year before the expiration of the valid accreditation. If the HEI does not submit a request for new accreditation within this period, the validity of the accreditation of the HEI, i.e. the study program ends on the following day after seven years have expired.

However, in accordance with the Decision on declaring a state of emergency ("Official Gazette RS", no. 29/2020) and the Regulation on the application of deadlines in administrative procedures for time state of emergency ("Official Gazette of RS", no. 41/20 and 43/20):

1. Deadlines for submitting accreditation requests and external quality assurance of HEI and study programs, which expire in time state of emergency, will be considered expired when 30 days have passed since the termination of state of emergency.
2. Deadlines for a) filing appeals against decisions on dismissal/rejection of accreditation requests, b) responding to warning notes regarding elimination of deficiencies, opinions on the elimination of deficiencies, conclusions on irregularities of requests and requests of peer-review panels for the submission of additional information and documentation, and c) statements on the reports of peer-review panel, which expire during the state of emergency, will be considered expired when 30 days have passed since the termination of state of emergency.
3. Decisions on dismissal/rejection of accreditation requests, warning notes regarding elimination of deficiencies, opinions on elimination of deficiencies, conclusions about irregularity of requests, requests of the peer-review panels to submit additional information and documentation and requests of the peer-review panel for statements on reports, which were submitted via regular or electronic mail during a state of emergency, will be considered, in terms of the application of the determined deadlines, executory when 15 days have passed since the termination of the state of emergency, i.e. the deadlines for acting on the said act or declaring a legal remedy against the said act begin to run when 15 days have passed since the termination of the state of emergency.

HEIs, that have prepared the required documentation, could electronically: 1) submit an accreditation request of the institution and/or study program, 2) file an appeal against the decision on the rejection of the accreditation request, 3) respond to a warning note or opinion, 4 ) complete the accreditation request upon conclusion of the irregularity of the request, and 5) submit the requested information and documentation to peer-review panels and statements on the reports of the peer-review panels.

#### **4. ADDITIONAL MEASURES DETERMINED BY NEAQA**

Since the first cases infected with the COVID-19 virus, the director of the NEAQA set additional measures in accordance with the recommendations of the World Health Organization and measures set by the Government of the Republic of Serbia on preventing the emergence, spread and suppression of the infectious disease COVID-19.

The first additional measures were adopted by the NEAQA on March 12, 2020:

1. Employees are obliged to comply with and act in accordance with all measures adopted or that will be adopted by the Government of the Republic of Serbia,
2. CAQA meetings will be organized electronically in the upcoming period,
3. Official trips abroad are cancelled,
4. Visits to HEIs are suspended or canceled,
5. Employees returning from an official trip from an area with intense transmission of COVID-19 are obliged to be in home quarantine for 14 days and to work from home,
6. All trainings and gatherings are canceled.

Based on the provisions of Article 192, paragraph 1, item 1), in connection with the provisions of Article 42 of the Employment Act ("Official Gazette of RS", no. 24/2005, 61/2005, 54/2009, 32/2013, 75/2014, 13/2017 - Decision of the RS CC, 113/2017 and 95/2018 - authentic interpretation), and according to the Regulations on organization of the employer's work during the state of emergency ("Official Gazette of RS" no. Z1/2020), adopted by the Government of the Republic of Serbia, as well as based on Article 14 of the Statute of the NEAQA, the director of NEAQA adopted a decision on remote work starting April 1, 2020. year, i.e. starting March 20, 2020 in case of one employee, when intercity traffic was suspended.

Since the Government of the Republic of Serbia began gradually relaxing the measures adopted due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus, from May 4, i.e. May 11, 2020, NEAQA started scheduling visits to HEIs starting Monday May 4, 2020, in cases where the peer-review panels submitted preliminary reports and under the conditions that the members of the peer-review panel and the HEI agrees to organize the visit, in compliance with all measures adopted by the Government of the Republic of Serbia.

Since the state of emergency in the Republic of Serbia was lifted on May 6, 2020, but the epidemiological measures remained in force: keeping a distance of two meters and banning public gatherings, public transport in Belgrade was re-established on Friday, May 8 2020 and the daily operations in the Palace of Serbia had not yet returned to normal (restaurants and buffets would not be open), NEAQA was organized in the form of on-call in its premises from Monday, May 11, 2020 to Friday, May 29, 2020. NEAQA returns to regular operating mode in its premises June 1, 2020.

Considering the ban on traveling abroad in the surrounding countries, foreign reviewers will probably not be able to enter Serbia for the next month, in accordance with Article 9 of the Rulebook on Standards and Procedures for the Accreditation of Study Programs, a visit to a HEI in the process of accrediting study programs for doctoral studies can be organized if the **institution ensures that the foreign reviewer has access via Video Conference, Skype, Viber, etc., with the mandatory physical presence of other members of the peer-review panel.**

In accordance with the current epidemiological measures, the HEI is to provide a **larger conference room, previously disinfected, in which it is possible to achieve a physical distance of at least 2 meters, as well as protective equipment (masks and gloves) for all members of the peer-review panel and other participants at the meeting.** In the event that all measures and recommendations have not been complied with, the peer-review panel may abandon the visit, i.e. terminate the visit and notify NEAQA.

Considering the epidemiological situation and the need to reduce the number of participants during the visits, **the appointed coordinators of peer-review panels from the NEAQA Secretariat should not participate in the visits,** except when necessary. The coordinator, in agreement with the institution and the panel, will organize the visit in such a way that all measures and recommendations from the previous paragraph are met. **The coordinator is obliged to be available for the duration of the visit to members of the panel on their official mobile phone number,** which will be provided to the panel in a timely manner, in case the panel needs explanations, clarifications or assistance.



The NEAQA Secretariat has received official mobile phones and official phone numbers that were added to electronic signatures used in communication with reviewers and institutions by electronic mail. Also, the employees are to be available to the **parties (reviewers, institutions, etc.) on the official phone number on weekdays from 12:00 to 3:00 p.m., i.e. during the visit to the relevant peer-review panel and HEI**, and to other employees, director, CAQA, members and members of the MB during office hours from 7.30 (8.00) to 15.30 (16.00).

**The company car can have a maximum of three passengers along with the driver.** The car must be disinfected before and after driving.

Reviewers can use bus, rail intercity traffic and their own car as means of transportation, and their expenses will be reimbursed in accordance with current regulations.

NEAQA has provided a sufficient amount of protective masks, gloves and alcohol for disinfection.

## 5. CAQA ELECTRONIC MEETINGS

Given the circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in the territory of the Republic of Serbia, the Decision on declaring a state of emergency ("Official Gazette of the RS", number 29/20) and the measures adopted by the Government of the Republic of Serbia in the fight against the pandemic, and in accordance with the additional measures taken NEAQA, the meetings of the Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance (CAQA) have been organized entirely electronically every Thursday since March 15, 2020.

The CAQA held a total of 11 electronic meetings since the introduction of measures in the fight against COVID-19, i.e. the state of emergency in Republic of Serbia.

A total of 129 accreditation requests were considered at the meetings, of which six HEIs and 80 study programs were accredited, and two HEIs received initial accreditation. As well, an opinion and a warning note were issued in order to eliminate deficiencies in accreditation, that is, additional clarifications were requested from peer-review panels.

Complying with the circumstances caused by the spread of the COVID-19 virus in the territory of the Republic of Serbia and the measures adopted by the Government of the Republic of Serbia, and having in mind that the agenda of CAQA meetings always contains a large number of items, scheduling and holding electronic meetings of the CAQA is organized as follows:

1. Announcement of the CAQA electronic meeting, as well as in the case of regular meetings, was sent by e-mail on Mondays, that is, three days before the meeting;
2. The deadline for submitting materials, as in the case of regular meetings, was Wednesday at 1:00 p.m., i.e. 10 hours before the meeting;
3. The agenda with materials for the electronic meeting was delivered by e-mail no later than 15:00 on Wednesdays, that is, 20 hours before the meeting;
4. A member of the CAQA who has an objection or comment on a proposed item of the Agenda submits it directly to the President of the Commission no later than Thursday at 10:00 a.m., i.e. one hour before the start of the electronic meeting, so that the Agenda can be corrected in a timely manner;
5. The electronic meeting was opened by prof. Ana Šijački, PhD, president of CAQA, by an e-mail on Thursdays at 11:00 a.m. and from that moment the members of the Commission could vote; the voting lasted until Friday at 10:00 a.m., that is, 11 hours from the start of the electronic meeting;

6. The members voted by opening a link in the text of the email sent by prof. Šijački and which was specially marked; By opening the link, the Commission members accessed a special page / voting form;
7. For the purposes of identification, the Commission members entered their e-mail address in the mandatory field, chose their names from the list of Commission members and accessed the voting;
8. The Commission members voted for each item on the agenda individually by selecting the answers "FOR", "AGAINST", "ABSTAIN" or "NOT VOTING" (e.g. due to conflict of interest), as the Commission member had to select an answer for each item on the agenda (these were mandatory fields);
9. A field (which is not mandatory) was left for the members of the Commission to enter a discussion or comment about one of the items on the agenda, specifying which item on the agenda it is;
10. After voting, the Commission members chose the "Submit" option located at the bottom of the voting page; By selecting the "Submit" option, a new page was opened where the Commission members could choose a link to view the current voting result or a link to changing their vote; Also, the members of the Commission received an email with their vote, which also contains a link for a possible change of vote; NEAQA received the same email;
11. Voting via a special page was possible only during the the electronic meeting (from Thursday at 11:00 a.m. to Friday at 10:00 a.m.); Only the votes via the voting page were valid; Voting by email or voting outside the voting period were not taken into account;
12. In the event that a member of the Commission received an email with the results of the vote, but did not vote, the member should contact NEAQA at office@nat.rs in order to prevent misuses. Votes were accepted only from registered e-mail addresses of Commission members, to which invitations for meetings were sent;
13. After the end of voting, the President of the Commission closed the meeting in 11 a.m. on Fridays, i.e. 24 hours after the opening of the meeting and announced the voting results for each item on the agenda.

## **6. TRANSPARENCY OF THE WORK OF NEAQA**

During the state of emergency, NEAQA continued to regularly (once a month), update and publish the publication Student Guide (Results of accreditation of HEIs and study programs in the Republic of Serbia) on its website. This electronic publication contains information about HEIs and their study programs with the dates when they were last accredited, with a note that the accreditation is valid for seven years, which covers the accreditation results in the period from 2007 to 2020.

Also, during the state of emergency, a total of 17 news items were published in Serbian, namely: nine on CAQA meetings, four notices on the work of NEAQA during the state of emergency and four on international activities of NEAQA, as well as two news items in English.