

LISTEN, TALK AND TEAM-UP

Considerations
for panel members in
external quality assurance

A project of the **European Students' Union**
and **European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education**



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Conversation, investigation and presentation skills are essential for value-added and open discussions in external quality assurance (EQA) and for further promoting trust in, and enhancement and development of the related evaluation procedures. In this regard, reflections on attitude and behaviour are of high importance as the QA reviewers are responsible for the impact of their review activities. The different stakeholders represented on each panel must bring their own points of view, based on experience and knowledge to bear on the evaluation procedures, while building on the views and interests of their peers.

FOR WHOM?

This project aims to provide **QA reviewers** with reflections that are applicable and useful **for all involved stakeholder groups from all levels of experience.**

WHAT?

The following considerations are a **collection of topics and reflections with regard to communication and beyond** – from looking at why effective communication is relevant in QA reviews across the different roles and expectations of involved parties to practical tips for building an inclusive and appreciative environment in remote reviews.

HOW TO USE IT?

These notes are intended to promote the creation of a fruitful and constructive working environment, with the full engagement of all parties involved – both within the external expert panel and between the panel and the institution under evaluation. They should provide you with an overview of the general communication during reviews, and can serve to establish a standardised approach to conducting the assessments in an online and offline format. Have a look and see which reflections and recommendations are useful for you.

Why is effective communication relevant and should be considered in external quality assurance procedures?

Effective communication is key for achieving an engaging working environment and producing the most objective and comprehensive assessment within QA procedures.

The manner of communicating contributes largely to the **transparency** and the **integrity** of the panel and their work, as open information-sharing allows for the equal information provision and understanding of different topics and issues – both among the panel members and between panel members and the interviewed stakeholders. Importantly, **it improves the quality of evaluation procedures through inclusivity and equality** of panel members and interviewees by allowing them to contribute to the review with their knowledge, opinions and reflections.

Sound communication promotes an increase in the **functionality of the panel** by communicating the relevant targeted information swiftly, showing mutual support towards other panel members, validating the diversity in opinions/approaches and supporting equal levels of engagement and understanding of the evaluation processes. So, shared ownership and responsibility builds the foundation for good work in external QA.

Finally, effective communication contributes to the **validation of individuality** of the panel members, by acknowledging each other's contributions, creating an open and communicative working environment and recognising the human factor in the evaluation process.

When preparing a site visit:

- Organise a panel briefing meeting to build team spirit
- Agree on a clear set of rules, responsibilities and deadlines to which all panel members sign up
- Take time and prepare carefully for the introductory meeting and the evaluation
- Ask the other panel members if anything remains unclear

During a site visit between panel members:

- Remember to not act independently, but contribute to the group's work and a collective outcome rather than insisting on personal views
- Refer to and build on what others have said (acknowledge others' ideas and reflections) and encourage others to participate in the evaluation process by giving them the floor
- Be aware of the different higher education and QA systems the reviewers, the agency and institutions come from/operate in
- Be flexible and adaptable during the review process when interviewing different stakeholder groups. 'Read the room' and adjust your communication technique accordingly
- Consult with each other regularly between meetings with stakeholders. This encourages shared insights from all panel members. Check in with each other to make sure that everyone feels the questions and conversation from the panel is balanced and that everyone can speak up when they need to ask a question or a follow-up
- Give everyone the space to finish their sentences and train of thought without interruption, regardless of their experience or position
- Make sure that all panel members are equally treated. If you chair the session, also ensure that every panel member has the chance to ask questions
- Stay focused on the conversations and tasks at hand – don't try to also focus on work outside the evaluation

During a site visit panel members and interviewees:

- If you are chairing the session, start the session by giving everyone time to settle in and introduce themselves. Briefly introduce the panel members and the objective and context of the evaluation
- Listen actively to the interviewees and your panel colleagues. Acknowledge there might be a lack of understanding of certain questions, answers, or processes. Paraphrase what you have heard to confirm your understanding, if a situation seems unclear
- Address interviewees and panel members by name
- Voice your opinions and concerns and stay curious in all situations
- Use easy-to-understand and concise questions in interviews and avoid QA-specific terms
- Ask open questions, without making assumptions and build your argumentation taking into account the full picture (rather than a minor interpretation of one detail)
- Triangulate your evidence by asking the same question in different interviews when appropriate – this may strengthen your evidence
- Ask questions that are in the scope of the standards to be assessed without giving advice or long introductions
- Be aware of language barriers
- Be aware of your non-verbal communication (e.g. gestures, eye contact or facial expressions)
- Communicate openly and respectfully about sensitive issues – don't avoid them if they are relevant to the review
- Make sure that everyone participates in the meeting. Address participants directly if necessary and appropriate
- Consider concluding questions at the end of a meeting
- Give the interviewees the opportunity at the end of the meeting to make any final points
- Save your internal panel discussions and any kind of individual preliminary evaluation for the breaks and private meetings



Specificities of expert panel's communication for external quality assurance purposes

The **European Standards and Guidelines** (2015), Standard 2.4 on peer review experts states that "External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s)." These different perspectives of experts are incorporated to support peer-review based external QA. Therefore it is important to get to know each panel member well to be able to build on each other's experience and knowledge, rather than on the titles of experts. When the team members introduce themselves to each other, different fields of expertise can be touched upon:

- **Familiarity with the national higher education context and language**
- **Familiarity with the QA agency's operations and approach**
- **Experience with QA reviews**
- **Expertise in internal and external QA**
- **Experience in stakeholder representation**

Furthermore, while it is useful to acknowledge the role of panel members (e.g., panel chair) as a starting point for clarity and structure of the panel's work, it is essential to maintain the team's openness, flexibility and agility.

The bottom line: Everyone brings valuable knowledge and experience to the table! It is not about comparing who has the 'better' input, but about the value of the complementarity of the panel's knowledge and experience as a whole.

Defining the roles of panel members in terms of communication

When talking about the specific roles in the panel one should be aware of the different interpretations in the national or QA provider's context. Not all described roles might have a specific person assigned, the agency representatives might be involved to serve in a secretary function or multiple roles might be combined in the duties of one person.

Panel Chair

The team's chair holds a particularly important role in establishing and maintaining the group's team spirit, ensuring that everyone - especially new members - knows the scope and the meaning of peer-review and providing room for all members to participate meaningfully in the review. The chair is responsible for overseeing the evaluation process (together with the panel secretary) while delegating tasks and responsibilities to panel members. Clear communication in setting expectations, resolving tensions or misunderstandings and checking-in with the team members is crucial for the success of an evaluation.

Panel Secretary

The panel secretary discusses and agrees, together with the chair and the panel members, how to structure the interviews and prepare the information gathering. The secretary is responsible for clarifying expectations, tasks and responsibilities with the team. The secretary supports the team by ensuring that all open issues are covered and gathering the comments and input of all panel members. Moreover, the secretary might be the contact person with the party under review and/or the central point to collect and forward additional requests by the panel members. The secretary should make sure to note down all the views transparently, even if they disagree with them. In different circumstances, the secretary's status might range from being a quiet observer to an active and equal panel member.

Third parties such as translators and technical support staff

Translators and the technical support staff are crucial for the smooth conduct of a review process but they should not interfere with the content of an evaluation or answer any assessment-related questions. Specifically, translators should familiarise themselves with QA terminology and they should have sufficient knowledge of that terminology, since accurate translations are key to grasping the information presented in a nuanced way. In general, their supportive work for the success of an evaluation should be acknowledged and appreciated.

Identifying and addressing the expectations of all involved parties for effective communication

External QA processes are intended to assess an institution's performance against a set of pre-established criteria and help institutions in their efforts to constantly review and enhance their work. The outcome of such evaluation can, on one hand, have immense implications for the institutional operations and its future status, and on the other hand, it can be a valuable opportunity to learn from peers in terms of quality enhancement. **This said, it is important to be aware of the expectations and emotions of both the external expert panel and the institution under review – and anticipate potential areas that will require attention.**

Peer-review panel

Peer-review panel's expectations:

- Open and honest self-reflection of institutions – both in the documentation and the interviews
- Well-structured and complete documentation by the evaluated institution
- Brief and informative answers during interviews
- Focused and goal-oriented working atmosphere
- Positive but critical attitude of all involved parties

The panel is:

- Curious and interested
- Enthusiastic
- Observant
- Nervous
- Overloaded, exhausted and tired
- Aware of dealing with potentially sensitive issues

Institution under evaluation (internal stakeholders)

Expectations of internal stakeholders:

- Clear practical information and instructions before and during the site visit
- Being heard and understood – especially in terms of their context and approaches taken
- A cohesive, reflective, respectful and fair evaluation
- Presentation and analysis of evidence-based findings
- A helpful report including encouraging improvement-oriented feedback and insights on possible blind spots

The internal stakeholders are/have:

- Interested in the evaluation process and its outcomes
- Optimistic and motivated
- Tense and nervous of the upcoming interviews
- Feelings of uncertainty
- Worried about consequences of what is said for the outcome of the evaluation



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Identifying and addressing the expectations of all involved parties for effective communication

In addition to the external QA expert panel and the institution under evaluation's internal stakeholders, external stakeholders such as representatives from the labour market, advisory boards and other parties involved in higher education need to be taken into consideration.

External stakeholders

Expectations of external stakeholders:

- Participation and contribution to the assessment process
- Having the space to provide feedback and reflection
- Having an impact on shaping the competences and soft skills of graduates from a higher education institution/programme that fit the labour market needs
- Acknowledging societal needs

The external stakeholders are:

- Eager to contribute to the assessment process
- Potentially feeling disconnected from the institution's day-to-day business
- Hopeful towards the quality enhancement of the institution/programme under evaluation
- Optimistic and motivated
- Critical

Looking at an institution's "history of review experiences"

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the institution under review and its previous experience in external assessments, a look at previous reports and their discussion points and recommendations can be helpful. This cannot only provide insights about thematic areas that might arise in the interviews but also helps reviewers to draw a picture of the current state, expectations and emotions of the institution under evaluation. **This can help the panel to communicate more effectively during the review and put the interviewees' reactions and answers into perspective.**

Impact of hybrid/online evaluations on the panel's communication and dynamic

The COVID-19 pandemic and the corresponding restrictions in terms of travelling and physical distancing resulted in online evaluations. QA agencies and other providers of external QA in higher education constantly work on improving their approaches and processes of using online tools to conduct these evaluations. However, online assessments have a vast impact on communication and conversation dynamics.

Positive impact of remote assessment procedures:

- A larger diversity of participants – both on the panel as well as on the interviewee side – can be included
- Communication for short consultations can be facilitated through online chat applications
- Breakout rooms can be used for quickly moving into a private discussion of the panel



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Challenges of digital site-visits and potential mitigation strategies:

Securing anonymity in an online/hybrid surrounding, e.g., a fear for potential recording of the panel's private discussions with interviewees

For the panel members:

- Ensure that the expert panel has an independent place for meetings and discussions
- Articulate your concerns clearly, if you believe the anonymity is uncertain throughout the evaluation stages
- Discuss in advance if there is a need to record the interviews

For the interviewees:

- Use different modes of communication
- Sign official agreements on privacy and anonymity
- Make sure that the panel is aware of who is present in the room during a particular interview, to avoid identity errors or infiltration of the meeting

Building the team spirit within the expert panel

- Have meetings often, both before, during, and after the assessment
- Share interesting or funny stories from experts' everyday life
- Create personal breaks and team breaks

Scheduling quick debriefings in between the sessions

- Clearly separate, from the start, the debriefing sessions and the break sessions
- Schedule fixed debriefing sessions in advance and allow enough room for them in the programme

Negative impact on the panel dynamics and motivation due to long screen hours

- Schedule enough breaks
- Ensure all panel members get the approximately same speaking time, and that they often change, to keep the panel members focused
- Entertain the possibility of scheduling the review across more days, with a shorter working time per day
- If possible, try switching the roles between interview chair and note-taker



Much more preparation (e.g., of a site visit schedule, attribution of roles for all involved parties) needed for an online evaluation

- Thorough schedule preparation and adaptation if necessary
- Have a strong(er) coordinator role
- Have a back-up plan in case chair has technical difficulties or other similar foreseeable difficulties
- Ask the institution to provide virtual sources with depictions of the on-site experience (photos, videos, testimonials etc.)

Limited or missing non-verbal communication

- Ensure all the participants have their camera on and that the conditions for a video call are optimal (good angle, lighting and camera quality)
- Put extra attention on the tone and the phrasing of sentences
- Limit the number of participants per interview
- Inform interviewees that the panel may have to politely interrupt discussion if time is short

