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Digital Transformation in Quality Assurance and its Impact on Communication

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Introduction

As for almost all areas, the corona crisis represents a hard break for higher education and the accreditation (respective certification) system. For this reason, several webinars have even been held on the subject (AACSB 2020; ENQA 2020). The accreditation agencies felt the impact in the fact that many on-site visits within the scope of accreditation procedures were postponed indefinitely. For everyone's safety, many agencies have asked their staff to work from home only. As far as the higher education institutions (HEI) are concerned, the federal structure in Germany and the extensive academic freedom of the HEIs meant that their reactions were not simultaneous, initially. Ultimately, however, all HEIs had to massively restrict their research and teaching activities. For private HEIs without state funding, this measure naturally represented a particular economic burden. Meanwhile, many HEIs, which actually use traditional teaching and learning methods have been obliged to switch to digital media. Next winter will probably begin the first semester of academic history in which face-to-face lectures will merely play a secondary role (On digital teaching see Handke 2017, p.58-68. On digital exams in the German higher education law, see Morgenroth 2020, p.130. Research and development projects dealing with electronic proctoring, for example, are currently receiving a boost from the corona crisis. FIBAA is involved in such a project for consultancy services and, together with its partner institution, will publish the results in a suitable place).

With regard to the accreditation system, at least in the German higher education area, the German Accreditation Council reacted quickly and determined that HEIs would not have to fear possible

accreditation gaps, but could rely on an extension of the accreditation periods (German Accreditation Council 2020). Surprisingly, we are currently facing the paradoxical situation that many peer review experts in the higher education sector, who are increasingly working from home due to the corona crisis, actually have a lot of time for on-site visits – especially when such on-site visits are conducted digitally. However, such digital on-site visits have so far only been carried out by some HEIs and accreditation agencies. The main reason for this, apart from concerns about the legal requirements, is the uncertainty of how such on-site visits are carried out successfully.

For this reason, the Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation (FIBAA), Head Office in Bonn (Germany), shares its experience as an accreditation agency in this article and summarises it systematically. The interim results of the digital on-site visits are to be processed from the perspective of the stakeholders HEIs, project managers and peer review experts in order to work out a successful model for digital on-site visits. Indeed, the authors recognise a connection between digital transformation and communication in a "remote world". Therefore, a section at the beginning of this article is dedicated to this subject.

Communication in Virtual Environments

No matter if we wanted to or not, the last few months have taken us into the world of digital communication. The office with its employees and managers was suddenly 100% connected via Internet and was responsible for the company via various communication platforms. Day-to-day business, corporate decisions and work for the company all took place "remotely". Of course, the accreditation agencies were also confronted with this situation and it quickly became clear that the respective processes of the ongoing accreditation (respective certification) procedures could not suddenly come to a standstill.

A challenge was posed by the procedures, especially in connection with the on-site visits to the HEIs. On-site visits are the milestone in the accreditation procedures in which it is necessary to question the explanations of the self-evaluation reports more closely and personally on site, to enter into dialogue with the respective actors at the HEIs. These facts form a further important basis for the subsequent expert opinion on the accreditation of the HEI. An essential part of this milestone in the entire process is the exchange, dialogue, and discussion with the various stakeholders - in short, intensive communication. Thus, it was necessary to suddenly make this intensive "communication milestone" virtual, if one did not want to delay the procedure or postpone the upcoming accreditation.

In order to better understand the essential feature of the on-site visit - the communication and the perspectives of the different actors presented below - a brief digression is needed into the situation of communicating in the "remote world". Peter Dietrich explains here in a newsletter of the University of Applied Sciences Kufstein in Tyrol on the "remote world" published in April that communication is based on feedback from the mutual communication actors. "As soon as two or more actors get into contact with each other, they orientate themselves on the reactions - in other words, on the feedback of the other" (Dietrich 2020, p.1). This aspect applies both verbally and non-verbally, such as gestures and facial expressions of the respective interlocutor. Non-verbal feedback in particular usually helps us to underpin our messages with the intended meaning. In order to achieve this effect in the "remote world" as well, we increasingly make use of the emojis we are familiar with in virtual conferences in a parallel chat. Indeed, as Dietrich points out, communication via our virtual platforms does not seem to convey this feedback function as effectively. "Digital communication does not share all the characteristics of analogue communication and vice versa" (Bauer/Müßle 2020, p. 12). The authors Bauer & Müßle also state that emoticons are not a full-fledged substitute for facial expressions, body language, timbre of the voice, frowning and laughing.

Dietrich's clear statement here is "A 'less' of direct contact must be compensated by a 'more' elsewhere." But what does this mean for the situation in the on-site visits? Here, the communication success factors listed by Dietrich should be transferred accordingly (see Dietrich 2020, p. 3).

1.) Over-prepare: This means that, as described in detail below, the on-site visit requires more intensive and detailed preparation from all sides, especially with regard to the peer review experts' list of questions for the interview partners at the HEIs. Last but not least, the preparation of the technical conditions must take place.

2.) Over-act: The project managers must have good moderation skills and all information must be highlighted supportively, which can lead to a more pronounced feedback function.

3.) Over-view: "You can't not communicate" - this axiom of Watzlawick is not to be seen in remote mode in the same way as in personal conversation. There is no non-verbal communication. It is therefore important that there is a second project manager in the remote "on-site visit", who has exactly this "non-communicating" in mind and also does not overlook an occuring "side chat".

4.) Over-care: Getting to know each other personally through dialogue is one of the important aspects of the on-site visit. Watzlawick names this fact in his second axiom "Every communication has a content and relationship aspect" (Watzlawick et al. 2017). This awareness must be anchored even more firmly in an on-site visit, since - in the virtual environment - the important relationship work can just be ensured to a limited extent. In the following sections, the consequences of the factors of "remote communication" illustrated above for the virtual environment will be described in detail.

The Higher Education Institution in the Ongoing Accreditation Process

Although the German Accreditation Council has made it clear that an extraordinary extension of the accreditation periods is possible, many HEIs (especially private ones) are interested to finish the accreditation procedure in order to be able to actively advertise on the higher education market. To achieve this goal, there are a number of tasks on the way to accreditation, including the intensive communication with the accreditation agency. The HEI should define a person as coordinator (or a small circle of representatives) to prepare the accreditation procedure in close cooperation with the agency's project manager. Internally, the tasks in the preparation of the accreditation procedure start with the direct interchange within the staff, which is currently limited and mainly compensated through digital channels. In concrete terms, this means that self-evaluation reports, for which - on the one hand - the technical and content expertise of the lecturers is required and - on the other hand - the knowledge and editorial work of the administration and quality management are currently produced with higher expense and loss of time in some institutions: At least in HEIs where classical communication channels were established and local exchange was institutionalised, the switch to digital channels is associated with certain costs. The coordination between the interview groups must be timely and remote.

One of the biggest challenges for many HEIs is the required technology for digital on-site visits. Within the scope of preparing a digital on-site visit, it must be ensured that all relevant groups (HEI management, course management, teaching staff, quality management, administration and students) are available at the time and have access to the digital platform of the on-site visit. This naturally includes the organisation of office space if some of the HEI staff participates in the digital on-site visit from a common location.

Another important criterion for successful implementation is technical support for the procedure. From this it can already be concluded that personal resources are increased in many digital procedures. In some cases, even further investments (e.g. additional licenses for communication

platforms) are necessary. Timely and careful preparation of the procedure is crucial for successful accreditation.

Accreditation Agencies and their Project Managers

On behalf of their accreditation agency, the project manager is faced with the task of ensuring compliance with the legal requirements, guidelines and standards of the accreditation system, also in the context of digital on-site visits. One challenge is the coordination with the HEI regarding the scheduling and specifications of the digital on-site visit. All steps of coordination need a longer waiting time based on obtaining consent and clarification of feasibility.

Instead of personal preliminary talks at the location of the accreditation procedure, a digital exchange or a telephone conference must take place. Here we can already assume that in terms of preparation, a digital procedure amounts to more intensive preparation. This concerns the request of relevant materials in terms of the assessment criteria, the coordination of the experts and interview partners of the HEI and, of course, also the technology for the digital procedure (see below).

The accreditation agencies have as a side effect of the digital transformation an increased internal need for training in building up online moderation competence (see above: "Over-act"). As a rule, two project managers (instead of one project manager) are assigned for digital procedures and will be occupied with the procedure for a day (extended staffing requirements). On the one hand, the demands on project managers in online moderation are higher, on the other hand, technical support of the project manager is necessary. The parallel content-related discussion and technical requirements can only be accomplished by two project managers and a technical service back up.

Depending on the accreditation agency, the need for coordination may arise with regard to office space (and corresponding reservations), technical equipment, deadlines and the avoidance of overloading the data flow. For the accreditation agency, careful preparation of the infrastructure naturally also includes license management. An insufficient number of licenses can not only jeopardise an on-site visit, but also cause damage to the agency through operational consequences and legal sanctions. In this respect, care must be taken to ensure that not too many on-site visits are carried out in parallel. The agency may therefore have to make additional investments for licenses of the conference tool. When choosing a conference tool, special attention must be paid to the question of data protection compliance. A constant risk that affects both the moderation skills of the project manager and the feasibility of the entire procedure is the technology and its vulnerability to problems. For digital on-site visits to be successful, intensive internal coordination, preparations, additional competences of the project managers and additional personal resources are therefore needed.

Peer Review Experts

The digital transformation is opening new paths and can save certain resources. For peer-review-experts, digital procedures offer the advantage of being extremely time-saving. A digital procedure can be integrated much more easily into the everyday life of science representatives, representatives of professional practice and students since there is no time loss for travelling to and from the location of the HEI. Professional and private life can often be better reconciled with digital assessments than business travels.

But the switch to digital procedures can also be accompanied by an increased need for technical support. Since the preliminary discussion of subject matter on site is no longer carried out, the exchange within the expert panel is limited to a digital exchange or a telephone conference. An

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assessment of the HEIs' resources is limited to the information in the self-evaluation report, which may be visually illustrated by photographs. Documents (such as written exams and evaluations) are no longer viewed on site and discussed spontaneously. In general, the spontaneous element is omitted: With regard to the entire communication, spontaneous information that necessarily appears during a dialogue is lost. To compensate for this, two things are needed: First, intensive preparation and second, building a relationship between all participants, preferably in advance (see above: "Over-care").

Conclusion: An Approach to Successful Digital Transformation

FIBAA's experience shows that the digital transformation through the implementation of digital on-site visits is certainly possible. Digital procedures have advantages in some aspects, for example when one considers the time saved e.g the traveling which, however, also pays for itself through more intensive preparation. And, there are technical and personal requirements for digital processes which do not exist for classical procedures.

1.) A more intensive preparation time for coordination within the HEI, within the accreditation agency and within the expert panel must be expected (see above: "Over-prepare"). For a successful procedure, it is advisable that all parties involved exchange information extensively in advance by telephone and digitally. Every on-site visit has to have a testing phase before, so that the technical functioning of communication is ensured from a technical perspective.

2.) Accreditation agencies have an increased internal need for training in building up online moderation competence (see above: "Over-act"). The training of the project manager for online moderation has a special role to play. It makes sense if the second project manager accompanying a procedure is not only technically versed, but can also provide support in terms of content.

3.) This second project manager is also essential for the „Over-view" (see above). Only a clear "Over-view" and good preparation can compensate for the limitation of communication (e.g. the loss of spontaneous elements).

4.) The limitation of communication must be compensated by the "Over-care". The more intensively all that involved exchange information beforehand, the better a personal relationship can be established. In the sense of Watzlawick, communication then not only includes a content aspect, but also a relationship aspect.

On the basis of all aspects mentioned, it can be stated that digital on-site visits are possible, but only if the procedure is adapted to digital conditions. From the point of view of the accreditation agency this leads to more personnel and technical resources and thus to further costs. However, nothing stands in the way of a successful implementation of digital procedures, whereby a good and trusting cooperation of all participants is crucial for success. The digital transformation can only be achieved by adapting the new comprehension of communication.

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