

The Impact of Pandemic in Cross-Border External Quality Assurance in Europe

Background and Purpose

The increase of cross-border external quality assurance (CBEQA) may be consequence of the failure of national quality assurance (QA) systems in providing international recognition for higher education institutions (HEIs) (Stella & Woodhouse, 2010), or may result from the rise of cross-border higher education (CBHE) offer and the need to assure its quality. In any case CBEQA contributes to ensure the quality of HEIs and systems and to promote their internationalization (Hou, Morse & Wang, 2017; Trifiro, 2018; Amaral et al, 2016).

CBEQA is understood as the external QA activities conducted in a country that is not the one where the QA agency is based (ENQA et al, 2017), and implies the movement of people throughout borders. However, in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic brought significant impacts on the normal functionality of society, including HEIs, QA agencies and governmental bodies (Sahu, 2020; Hou et al, 2021). This work aims to analyse the impact of the pandemic on CBEQA in Europe, using data available in the DEQAR database.



DEQAR Database

March 2020 to August 2021

3818 reports (380 CBEQA)

language (English) and location (only the EHEA)

116 reports (83 CBEQA)

For further analyses 35 had to be discarded since they were not available for download

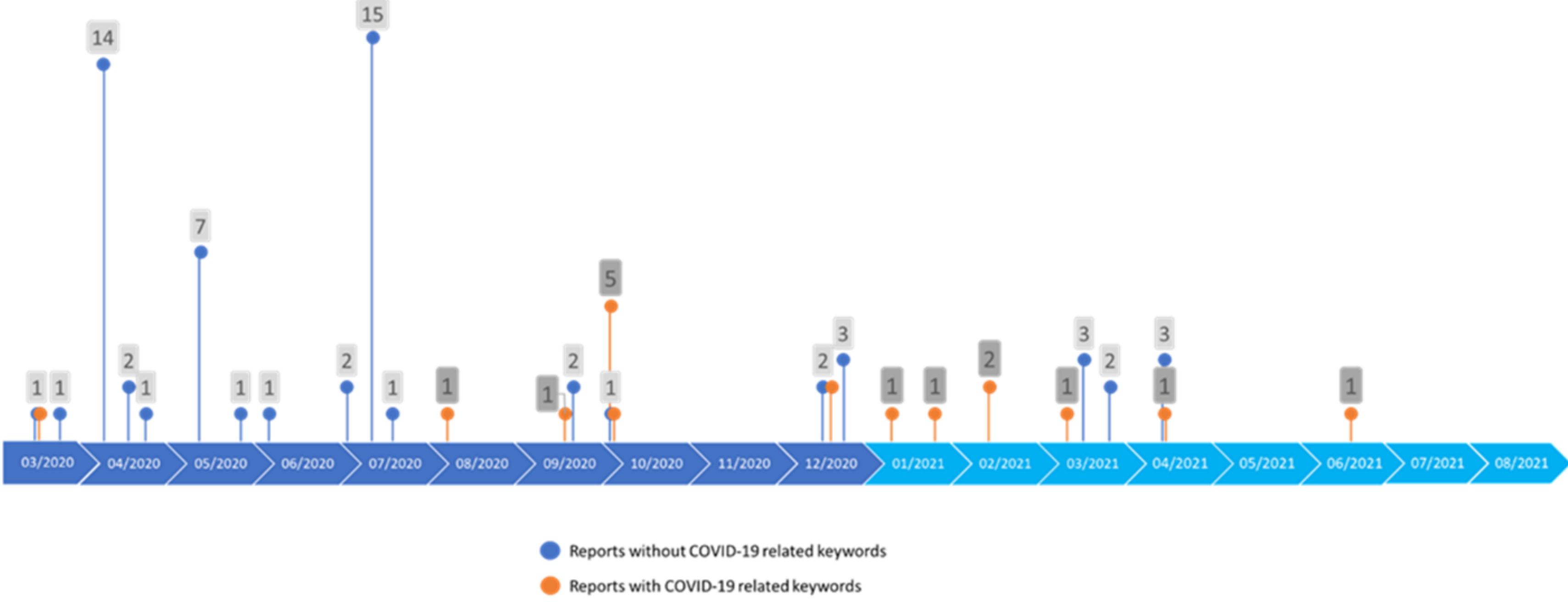
To analyse the impact of the pandemic on CBEQA in Europe, the following variables from the DEQAR database were used: Country; Report_agency; Report_type; Report_status; Report_valid_from; and Report_crossborder. Firstly, data was statistically analysed following a descriptive quantitative approach (Coutinho, 2016); then, an exploratory content analysis of a sample of reports was conducted. To select the sample, the whole set of reports was filtered by period (validity date from March 2020 to August 2021), language (English) and location (only HEIs from the European Higher Education Area). Next, a set of keywords (Covid; pandemic; quarantine; Coronavirus; virus; SARS-COV; crisis; "social distancing"; isolation; lockdown; "distance learning"; "virtual learning"; "remote learning"; "online learning") was used to perform a search throughout all the filtered reports and select the ones to be content analysed (18).

Design methodology

Result and preliminary conclusions

It was possible to identify a decrease both in the total number of reports and CBEQA reports in 2020. Also, the decrease of national activities appears to be cyclic with evidence of three previous falls before 2020. However, the decrease in CBEQA reports was smaller and only occurred in 2020 interrupting a tendency of increase over the years.

The content analysis of the 18 selected reports led to the identification of 3 main categories (see Table below). Overall it seems that QAA and HEIs were fast in adapting to online operation in order to continue their work, despite a number of challenges both QA and HEIs had to overcome.



Month	Reports without COVID-19 related keywords	Reports with COVID-19 related keywords
03/2020	1	1
04/2020	14	2
05/2020	7	1
06/2020	1	1
07/2020	15	2
08/2020	1	1
09/2020	1	2
10/2020	1	5
11/2020	2	3
12/2020	1	1
01/2021	1	1
02/2021	2	2
03/2021	1	3
04/2021	1	3
05/2021	1	1
06/2021	1	1
07/2021	1	1
08/2021	1	1

Categories	Description	Subcategories
COVID 19 effects	Impact of COVID 19 pandemic on HEIs and QAAs work and procedures	1.1 Impacts on EQA (8) 1.1.1 Postpone or change visit (8) 1.1.2 Lack of information (2) 1.2 Impacts on HEIs (13) 1.2.1. Transition of services and structures to online operation (12) 1.2.2 Financial impact (2)
Actions taken by HEIs as result of COVID 19	Actions adopted by HEIs to overcome constraints posed by the COVID 19 pandemic	2.1 Online teaching and learning (9) 2.2 Loan of equipment (3) 2.3 Adoption of new examination rules (4) 2.4 Virtual access (2)
Recommendations to HEIs resulting from COVID 19	Recommendations suggested by QAAs to HEIs for dealing with COVID 19 impacts	3.1 Operations and management (9)

Main Conclusions

1

The major impact was the urgency to adapt all processes, both at HEI and QA level, to the new health context;

2

The rules of the new health context reduced quality assurance activities, both at national and international levels. The analysed reports show that QAAs and HEIs were fast in adapting to online operation in order to continue their work;

3

QAAs: virtual visits of peer reviewers may result in less information from external stakeholders and students;

4

HEIs: challenges from remote teaching and learning, such as the capacitation of faculty, staff and students to online work, ensuring that students were able to follow classes and adaptation of services and spaces for safe use;

5

The number of QA reports referring to the COVID 19 situation is still rather small to allow a sound analysis of the pandemic effects over CBEQA;

6

As such, the goal is to continue monitoring the DEQAR database and its reports in search of new insights to better understand what has changed in CBEQA due to the pandemic.

- Questions to guide the discussions
- Why the number of CBEQA reports has decreased less, when this type of QA activity implies crossing borders between countries and regions, which became far more difficult with the pandemic?
 - Is there a significant delay between the conclusion of the peer review report and its submission to DEQAR? Does this mean that reports made during the pandemic are still absent from the database?
 - Was the methodology to select the sample adequate (use of covid-19 related keywords)? Is it possible that the low number of covid-19 references in the reports is consequence of the normalisation of the pandemic context?

References

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