Scoping Study of the Egyptian Higher Education Quality Assurance System

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, UK

Contents

Executive summary

Higher education (HE) in Egypt is currently undergoing major development; the *Egypt Vision 2030* aspires to 'A high-quality education and training system available to all, without discrimination within an efficient, just, sustainable and flexible institutional framework'. One of the stated objectives of the HE strand of this document is a focus on 'Enhancing quality of higher education institutions'. The National Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Education (NAQAAE) is central to this development.

In this context, and as accreditation at both institutional (faculty) and programme level becomes more embedded in the HE system, NAQAAE wished to use this project to ensure that its current processes remain effective or whether there are possibilities for improvement and/or streamlining in line with international good practice.

The project combined desk-based examination of documentation together with communication with NAQAAE's main stakeholders and the agency itself as a means of gaining an understanding of the current processes and their application, how effective they are, and where recommendations for improvement might be made.

Four key findings emerged from the project:

- There is universal agreement among stakeholders of the benefits of NAQAAE's work for the Egyptian HE sector in general and its accreditation processes in particular. Specifically, there is recognition of the need to develop institutional strategies and a culture of self-reflection, especially one that is based on the notion of a quality 'cycle' or 'loop.' At the programme level, there is clear recognition of the benefits of accreditation on internationalisation aspirations, including preparation for discipline-specific international accreditation and support for strengthening international partnerships.

- Views on further digitalisation of processes as a means of streamlining were mixed - all believe that the current level of digitalisation has been carefully introduced and works well; there is agreement that digitalisation is not a goal in itself but that it is a facilitator of effective processes. Nevertheless, the potential for streamlining and for shortening the duration of certain processes should not be ignored.

- There is agreement that the standards used by NAQAAE are well constructed, valid and in alignment with internationally agreed good practice and frameworks. The National Academic Reference Standards are also highly valued in terms of the guidance they provide at programme level. NAQAAE is clear that its standards must provide the impetus for institutions and programmes to improve so that they support the development of internal quality assurance as well as facilitate external processes and judgements.

- The communication of NAQAAE's approach and the value of its work emerged as a transversal theme.

The findings provided clear evidence of the excellent work that NAQAAE does with and for the Egyptian HE sector. To address the scope and purpose of the project, four models for potential future development of accreditation processes are proposed, together with recommendations for improvement in four key areas:

- communication
- training and briefing
- follow-up

- the balance between internal and external quality assurance.

They are offered in the spirit of improvement and in the knowledge that NAQAAE will consider them carefully with full knowledge and understanding of its remit, resources and national context.

1 Introduction and scope of the project

Higher education (HE) in Egypt is currently undergoing major development; the *Egypt Vision 2030* aspires to 'A high-quality education and training system available to all, without discrimination within an efficient, just, sustainable and flexible institutional framework'. One of the stated objectives of the HE strand of this document is a focus on 'Enhancing quality of higher education institutions'. The National Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Education (NAQAAE) is central to this development. The challenges for the quality assurance (QA) processes in HE, together with the challenges raised by COVID-19 have prompted NAQAAE to reflect on the current processes and practices of the accreditation process. The lessons learned throughout the pandemic have required NAQAAE to consider adopting a new policy of periodic external review to develop, in collaboration with its stakeholders, a 'lighter touch' and more technologically driven accreditation system to help NAQAAE fulfil its mandate to effectively assure the quality of the Egyptian HE system.

As accreditation at both institutional (faculty) and programme level become more embedded in the HE system, and as higher education institutions (HEIs) and programmes undertake initial accreditation and reaccreditation processes, NAQAAE wishes to ensure that its current processes remain effective. It sought to explore means of developing a more focused and streamlined approach where appropriate, taking into account a global trend towards more risk-based approaches to external quality assurance (EQA), whether the national context is one of accreditation, evaluation or review.

2 Methodology and activities

The project focused on a document review and on interviews with key stakeholders. Therefore, in line with the terms of reference for the project, activities included an examination of the documentation provided by NAQAAE on its current practices and processes to provide knowledge of the current systems and processes. The project consultant also examined relevant documentation published online from other sources.

There was communication between the project consultant and NAQAAE staff in order to check understanding and provide further insight. This communication was ongoing throughout the project. Meetings were also held between all project stakeholders at the start of the project and at the mid-way point between the analysis of the documentation and the design of the interview sessions.

The analysis of documentation informed the interviews with key stakeholder groups. These were:

- representatives from HEIs that had undertaken institutional accreditation
- representatives from programmes that had undertaken programme accreditation
- NAQAAE reviewers
- NAQAAE staff.

A prompt sheet for the framework for discussion was provided for each group but did not restrict discussion. There was no requirement for participants to 'prepare' in advance for the interviews with the result that discussions were lively, informative, and well balanced in terms of commentary on the value and benefits of the current system and suggestions or recommendations for change, improvement and innovation.

The final stage of the project was the drafting of this report which was shared in draft form with the British Council (BC), NAQAAE and the Quality Assurance Agency UK (QAA UK) for comments. The aim of this report is to provide NAQAAE with an external perspective on its

work both from its key stakeholders and from the project consultant. It contains examples of current good practice in NAQAAE's work as well as suggestions or recommendations for action and potential models for change. The report aims to provide NAQAAE with information for its consideration; it does not dictate next steps.

The report contains three appendices:

- list of the documentation provided by NAQAAE and through online searches
- prompt sheets for each of the interviews
- raw notes from the interviews.

The project wishes to thank NAQAAE and its stakeholders for the prompt provision of documentation and responses to questions and for the open and transparent approach to all interactions, including the stakeholder interviews. The project and its methodology were facilitated immensely in this regard.

3   Overview of information

For ease of structure, an overview of the information gleaned through documentation and interviews is broadly provided in line with the headings used for discussions in the interviews (which were, in turn, influenced by scrutiny of the documentation). Good practice and specific recommendations are noted under each heading. Many of the topics and issues raised pertain to more than one heading; therefore, cross-referencing is used where necessary.

Benefits and impact

To balance any suggestions or recommendations for change, it is important to know what the value of the current processes for accreditation are and how they are perceived to benefit the key stakeholder, in order to present NAQAAE with a full picture and to allow it to make any decisions for change based on the positive as well as areas for improvement.

Views on the benefits, value, and impact of NAQAAE's accreditation processes were mostly gleaned through interviews with stakeholders, although these were corroborated by the report of the review that NAQAAE undertook under the auspices of the Harmonisation of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation (HAQAA) project in 2018-19.

NAQAAE has not yet carried out its own formal impact studies on aspects of its processes; nonetheless, anecdotal evidence for the value of NAQAAE accreditation processes and examples of impact were strongly evidenced in the interviews.

Unsurprisingly, the comments offered by institutional representatives and reviewers were more generic and at a higher level, whilst those offered by programme representatives were more specific in nature. However, all participants agreed that NAQAAE's processes encourage the establishment of a system of planning for the future and a strategy for documenting improvement. They encourage testing, monitoring and self-reflection and help to develop a quality culture. Most importantly, the processes are seen as a continuous cycle that lead to improvement - the notion of quality enhancement rather than control was cited frequently during the interviews.

Institutional accreditation was universally regarded as a journey rather than a destination ('Accreditation does not mean perfection. We are happy to know that we are going in the right direction'.) There was recognition of the impact on strategic planning growth and of the benefits from the incremental increase in knowledge about QA over time resulting, for

example, in the embedding of processes for monitoring and student feedback. The idea of a 'quality loop' involving reaccreditation and follow-up/feedback was highlighted as important (indeed, this was an area that participants suggested could be strengthened).

Wider recognition of the institution, with a resulting impact on student recruitment, both nationally and from overseas was also highlighted, alongside increased confidence in undertaking additional accreditation by international bodies.

Participants who had undertaken programme accreditation also saw benefit in relation to international accreditation and saw the national process as complementary to international programme accreditations. Indeed, there was clear recognition that NAQAAE ensures that its standards and processes are in line with international standards and processes; this was deemed to increase trust in Egyptian HE and to support international partnerships.

Participants who had experienced programme accreditation were also able to point to specific impact and benefits such as the impetus to improve the skills of teaching staff.

NAQAAE's view on the value and impact of its process was pragmatic - the importance of an evaluation project is to ensure that this impact is continued in future, including those who are undertaking reaccreditation. It recognises the global phenomenon of 'accreditation fatigue' and the need to provide 'value-added' for all HEIs and programmes, regardless of the number of times they have undergone a process. NAQAAE's goal is that QA is perceived as important for the quality of the programme, not to pass an accreditation.

Summary of commendations and recommendations

- The clear recognition of all participants of the value that NAQAAE has brought to the HE sector in Egypt in terms of developing trust and recognition in its institution and programmes and their outcomes.

- NAQAAE's efforts in ensuring that its work, ethos, standards and processes are in line with international expectations, thus allowing for international recognition of and trust in Egyptian HE.

- As resource becomes available, NAQAAE may wish to carry out targeted impact studies to further evidence and support areas for improvement in its processes.

- NAQAAE may wish to look at the follow-up element of its processes to see how this might be strengthened in any revised, streamlined process (see also section 4 below).

- Given NAQAAE's own goal that QA is perceived as important for the quality of the programme (that is, a truly embedded quality culture) rather than just to 'get through' an accreditation process, it may be useful for the agency to look at the relative balance between the development of internal QA (IQA) and external QA (EQA) in any future process. (See also 3iii below)

Digitalisation

NAQAAE is very clear that digitalisation is not a goal in itself but a potential facilitator for an accreditation process that achieves its objectives in the most efficient and effective way possible, reducing administrative burden on institutions, programmes, reviewers and NAQAAE staff but without losing the rigour, value and outcomes of the process. This was borne out by documentation including a presentation given by the President of NAQAAE, Professor Dr Youhansen Eid at the Going Global 2021 conference.

With that goal of digitalisation as a potential facilitator in mind, the interviews demonstrated a very common spread of views in relation to the extent to which processes should benefit from digitalisation (often from experience during the pandemic), ranging from those who wish processes to remain as digitalised or as 'on-line' as possible to those who wish everything to return to the non-digital as soon as possible! All options in between were also expressed, with the most common being the hybrid form of the processes that was developed during the pandemic as detailed below.

Interviewees generally agreed that the extant digitalised processes (for example for upload of documents) works well and provides reviewers with more time to focus and target the questions they want to ask at the site visit. However, despite electronic upload reducing burden on documentation, some participants pointed out that ensuring that all documentation is scanned and uploaded in time for the review is still stressful, despite not having to produce multiple hard copies.

From the reviewers' perspective, digitalisation of documentation is a mixed blessing - the quality and quantity of what is uploaded varies from HEI to HEI, (with some not even uploading the required minimum). However, from NAQAAE's perspective, digitalisation of documentation has proved to be an effective way of collecting the evidence-base as it allows for a clearly defined and understood time-limited period for upload thus avoiding later debate as to what was submitted, when and whether further documentation can be added at any time.

NAQAAE and the sector responded to the Ministry's request to ensure that HE moved online at the start of the COVID-19 crisis. NAQAAE revised its processes and documents accordingly and there was general agreement that it successfully established a hybrid/online process. In line with global practice, it postponed certain accreditation visits until this new process was established and guidance provided, and then adjusted the parameters of its process by sending out a form requesting details of how the institution/programme under review had adapted its infrastructure to cope with COVID-19.

Generally, participants believed that the current hybrid arrangement (that is, electronic upload of documentation and evidence followed by certain meetings held online and one day onsite) facilitates the process by allowing enough time to cover everything. (There was some confusion around the possibility of an extra day on-site, if necessary, with some participants citing this as part of the process and others suggesting that it become part of the process, which is already under consideration by NAQAAE.) Interviewees confirmed that, following the postponement of visits, online training and briefing was made available.

Generally speaking, and in line with some international evidence,[1] reviewers were of the view that the electronic upload of documentation, with the increased availability of evidence, is enough and that, post-pandemic, the rest of the process should return to normal. Institutions, on the other hand, were keen to maintain the hybrid process with the possibility to extend one day on site to two days if necessary.

Issues around training of reviewers and briefing of institutions and programmes in relation to any shift to online or digitalised processes are covered below under the relevant heading. However, all interview groups recognised that digitalisation impacts on teaching, learning and student assessment (including online exams) and that the need for more preparation of

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[1] For example, DIES/DAAD/BAN-PT project in Indonesia: Digitalisation of Quality Assurance: Lessons from the COVID-19 Disruption for the Future, December 2020 and NCEQE Georgia: Evaluation criteria and guidelines on online/blended teaching and learning, October 2020.

staff and the impact of online learning for students also needs to be addressed. The need for increased technical support within the HEIs was also mentioned.

Regardless of how the process operates post-pandemic, all interviewees and NAQAAE recognised the potentially positive impact of digitalisation, in particular, in shortening the length of time that one accreditation visit takes. In relation to electronic information, this should enable NAQAAE to develop a database of integrated data about each institution that should ultimately allow for comparability; one interviewee took this a step further and suggested that NAQAAE could look across the accreditation reports to pull out and publish good practice each year with a view to disseminating this across the sector. This would have the additional benefit of assisting NAQAAE further in demonstrating alignment with the African Standards and Guidelines (ASG), part C, standard 6: 'There is thematic analysis (production of a summary of reports), carried out from time to time, which describes and analyses the general trends in the findings of external reviews, assessments as well as evaluations of institutions and their programmes for possible policy direction'. The 2019 HAQAA report on NAQAAE stated, 'NAQAAE undertakes annual analyses of the state of educational institutions based on the review visits conducted during the year in question…it was not clear to the Panel whether this kind of analysis of external review reports informs higher education policy direction.' Such action could further NQAAE's role in supporting the Egyptian HE sector.

Summary of commendations and recommendations

- NAQAAE's clear assertion that digitalisation is not a goal in itself but a potential facilitator for an accreditation process that achieves its objectives in the most efficient and effective way possible, reducing administrative burden on institutions, programmes, reviewers and NAQAAE staff but without losing the rigour, value and outcomes of the process.

- The overall success in digitalising the submission of documentation and evidence and the subsequent move to online/hybrid site visits during the pandemic.

- That NAQAAE test the possibility of using its online documentation repositories to produce thematic reports on the outcomes of its accreditation processes, including the dissemination of good practice.

Standards

The standards against which institutions and programmes must align themselves are central to any accreditation process and can have a significant impact on its operation and how it is perceived. They are also central to considering the introduction of a risk-based approach (see also 'Process' below). Questions about the relevancy of all standards (and their indicators) to all HEIs and programmes, and whether they are all still applicable in a reaccreditation process are central to discussions around risk-based approaches. The interviews yielded interesting responses to such questions and that will provide NAQAAE with food for thought.

In general, stakeholders believe that the NAQAAE standards are well constructed and valid, although there was some feeling that the standards for programme accreditation are not as well developed as those for the institutional process.
They appreciated the learning curve that alignment with the standards created for them (see 3i: Benefits and impact). As already stated, stakeholders appreciate the work that NAQAAE has done to ensure that the standards are compatible with internationally used standards, stating that this is beneficial in terms of building
trust with international partners (both current and potential) as well as improving international

student recruitment and employment opportunities for home students. In general, participants found it difficult to prepare documentation against the standards for the first accreditation - in particular institutional and programme standards are challenging in relation to resources but there was strong agreement that those that deal with teaching, learning, students and programme design are the most useful.

Interviewees who have undergone programme accreditation also spoke enthusiastically about the National Academic Reference Standards (NARS) and said that the programme-specific standards, coupled with the NARS, allow professional disciplines to undertake international accreditation processes with confidence.

Indeed, the NARS were clearly of key importance to stakeholders in terms of their use both in the programme accreditation process ('They are the backbone of the whole process') and in terms of their potential to enhance programmes and their delivery; the support they provide to academics as a reference point when designing a programme and the fact that they can be used to carry out a gap analysis before revising curricula were particularly welcomed. Interviewees clearly viewed the alignment of their programme with the relevant NARS as an extremely important part of the process. Two NARS (Engineering and Medicine) have recently been revised and updated to focus on competencies. Interviewees urged NAQAAE to move ahead with the updating of all other NARS. NAQAAE is aware of the need to update the remaining NARS but resources are currently limited for this work.

Although overall there was little criticism of the standards and a belief that to move in the right direction in terms of fulfilling a standard demonstrates achievement in itself, and although, in general, stakeholders believe that no further revisions to the institutional standards are required at present, there was a suggestion that it may be useful to look at some of the indicators, for example for the last standard for programme accreditation (11: Indicators for programme success). It was suggested that these could be translated into the institutional standards, not as an additional standard but as a set of indicators at institutional level.

It was also suggested that the relative weightings of the institutional standards could be revisited (or that some could be merged) to create a simpler portfolio.

Specifically in relation to the programme standards, it was pointed out that there is some repetition across the standards. It was also felt that some standards, 10 (Enhancement) are too vague and need to be clarified.

A specific suggestion was made to include a standard around the process of learning. NAQAAE agreed that, as yet, institutions and programmes have no specific means of assessing learning outcomes and their achievement. However, the agency is of the view that accreditation processes should be encouraging institutions and programmes to evaluate, monitor and act on their own results, rather than assessing everything externally. All institutions now have a Monitoring and Evaluation Unit which has links to the Quality Unit. This links to the point raised in 3i above around the balance between IQA-EQA and leans on the idea that institutions would present their own results and outcomes from their IQA and monitoring processes as part of their evidence base. NAQAAE reinforced this idea of institutional responsibility in relation to both standards for accreditation and the NARS, stating that NAQAAE uses its tools for accreditation such as standards and the NARS as a means of supporting the capacity to self-evaluate, not with the capacity to teach.

Interviewees were specifically asked if they believed that some reconsideration of the accreditation standards might be reconsidered with a view to contributing to a more focused, streamlined process, particularly in relation to reaccreditation. A range of views resulted, from the idea that standards could be made more difficult for those that are going through

reaccreditation or that they should be required to demonstrate what has improved since their last accreditation visit (although any revised follow-up process might touch on this). The idea that a demonstrably successful track record in accreditation and reaccreditation might result in a lighter touch was greeted with cautious enthusiasm by some although others believed that the Egyptian system was not yet ready for such a risk-based approach and needed to work further on the current standards and processes before considering such an option. The idea of a lighter touch approach is revisited in 3iv Process and in section 4 below.

In relation to the discussion in 3ii: Digitalisation, NAQAAE clarified that there is a set of standards for online and distance learning but that these are now quite outdated and have not been used in the national accreditation systems. Practices have now been added to the indicators to cover blended learning post-pandemic; prior to that, reviewers considered the context of the HEI or the programme and applied and adapted the regular standards, as necessary. There is some potential to further enhance these standards so that they recognise the increasing role of online and distance education.

Summary of commendations and recommendations

- The role that NAQAAE's standards for institutional and programme accreditation have played in making tangible improvements to the teaching and learning processes and in assisting HEIs and programmes to develop their IQA and quality cultures.

- The alignment of NAQAAE's standards with internationally recognised standards for EQA.

- In order to maintain coherence in relation to any revision or updating to the standards, that NAQAAE consider the totality of detailed comments raised in this section in relation to revising the standards and the NARS rather than considering each suggestion individually.

- That NAQAAE find a way to revise a further one or two of the NARS, given the appreciation of these statements by the HE sector.

NB: suggestions in relation to the development of a lighter touch or more streamlined process are dealt with in subsequent sections.

Process

The operation of the accreditation processes was not discussed at length in any of the interviews but some very clear comments and suggestions were made, ranging from the specific (for example random checks on the institution during the five-year accreditation period; the provision of all reviewer comments for each accreditation visit in order to provide detail and context for the content of the report and the introduction of a check on grade inflation. NB: This would require institutions to clearly develop such processes internally in order for the accreditation process to carry out such a check) to more overarching and potentially substantial suggestions for change. These included:

- A process that is based on a platform that would accept the upload of annually updated documentation each year. The participant believed that this would lessen the burden on the quinquennial reaccreditation process for the institution and NAQAAE. This would require a unified system that was used by all HEIs. This suggestion was not universally liked (cost and annual burden were cited as problems). However, the suggestion is raised again in section 4 below.

- As mentioned in 3i above, follow-up to accreditation visits was raised by several interviewees and there is clearly a desire for interim reporting to NAQAAE with suggestions for minor visits (not random checks) during the five-year cycle to follow up on the implementation of the action plan.

Both of these points are picked up again in section 4 below.

Commendation and recommendation

- The appreciation demonstrated by stakeholders of NAQAAE's desire to continue to refine and improve its process in an open and transparent way.

Training and briefing

As evidenced in the Harmonisation of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation (HAQAA) report, NAQAAE operates a well embedded and useful training programme for its reviewers. It also offers orientation sessions to each programme and institution undertaking an accreditation. The issue of training and briefing is an important one as it underpins any decision to revise the current processes. Under this heading, therefore, some of the detailed comments offered by interviewees are offered for consideration but the broader, more theoretical discussion on training, briefing (and communication) is dealt with in section 4 below.

Various comments and suggestions were made across the different stakeholder groups that indicated the need for a more coherent approach to the discussion of training and briefing in this report. These included:

- A request that NAQAAE recruits more experienced and open-minded reviewers to add to the quality of the process and help it to be better accepted by academics.
- A request that NAQAAE tries to produce the accreditation reports more quickly.
- A request for clarification of the role of NAQAAE's technical committee - why are reviewers asked to clarify their views?
- More work on ensuring that reviewers come to collective views and judgement.
- Given the Ministry decision to formalise new online learning and teaching methods, a recognition that reviewers (and institutions) will need training and briefing on the impact of this on the accreditation process (including the operation of online site visits if they persist).

NAQAAE recognises that its processes are not universally well understood and that there are aspects that need clarification and explanation. For example, the electronic upload of documentation needs to be more targeted to the process and to the standards so as to provide reviewers with the right documents.

It also acknowledges that the parameters of reviewer activities, especially during on-line visits where reviewers can request to remotely attend learning sessions need to be clarified.

Finally, NAQAAE discussed the need to make the role of the reviewer attractive as, in common with many other countries, the remuneration is not high.

Commendation and recommendation

- NAQAAE's care in ensuring that training and briefing in its accreditation processes are in place for both reviewers and HEIs.

- That NAQAAE considers the detail of this section of the report in the light of the recommendations made in section 4 below.

4   Analysis, recommendations and potential models for future development

It is very clear from the calibre of NAQAAE's own documentation and reports on the functioning of the agency, as well as from the views expressed by stakeholders in the focus groups, that NAQAAE is doing excellent work with and for the Egyptian higher education sector. Examples of the journey that NAQAAE has led the sector on and how far it has travelled during its time in operation demonstrates its impact on a system that knew little of QA and/or its benefits and processes to one that is moving to a culture of self-assessment and improvement. Through its accreditation processes, NAQAAE has introduced the notion of a cycle of continuous improvement which has, in turn, facilitated the development of student feedback, course descriptions, stakeholder engagement and more.

International benefits in terms of recognition of outcomes, international student recruitment and the trust of partners are tangible. NAQAAE's approach of ensuring that its local approach articulates with the standards and practice of regional and international frameworks for QA is valued and valuable.

At the discipline level, the NARS (and especially those that have been revised in 2017 and 2018) also support international aspirations at programme level and they, together with the NAQAAE accreditation reports, add flavour to the information that is provided by Egyptian HEIs to their overseas partners and help to build the trust necessary for such partnerships to flourish. The fact that the Egyptian standards are recognisable as aligning with broader regional and international frameworks plays an important role in this regard.

It is in this context that NAQAAE sought to evaluate its accreditation processes to see if they could operate more effectively and efficiently while ensuring that their objectives are met. It is clear from this report that there are no glaring gaps or redundancies in the process as described through the documentation; and stakeholders, while they were happy to make suggestions, did not, overall, allude to any radical or overarching changes to process that they feel are necessary. Indeed, pages 6, 10 and 11 of this report highlight comments from the interviews that suggest that the HE sector itself feels that it would prefer to carry on with current processes which are yielding such positive impacts, rather than move to a more risk-based approach too soon.

Nevertheless, the rest of this section sets out some models for evaluation and accreditation that might allow for a more risk-based, focused approach to accreditation whether this is in the near or potentially medium to longer term future.

It also makes some overarching recommendations that it hopes will be useful for NAQAAE regardless of whether or not it chooses to make significant changes to its current processes now or in the future.

Potential models or options for the future development of accreditation processes

The following models are drawn from ideas and approaches that have been considered, and in some cases, implemented globally. The idea of risk-based QA has been discussed for some time but it has only become operational in some contexts relatively recently. The approaches come from accreditation and review processes operated by agencies and also from a recent approach to the review of QA agencies themselves by the European Association for Quality Assurance (ENQA). The models also include one of the suggestions made by a participant in the interviews.

The models should be considered by NAQAAE in the national context in which it works. The interviews elicited some feeling that the Egyptian HE sector was not yet ready to move to a more risk-based streamlined approach, and the models below take that viewpoint into account. Some models will work in some contexts but not in others and NAQAAE will apply its expert and local knowledge in this regard. It is also possible to take elements from some models or to 'mix and match' the models according to objectives and resource.

NB: Given the evidence provided during the course of the project, this paper does not offer a full risk-based model - several iterations of processes are generally required over a period of time rather than a sudden shift from a 'normal' accreditation process to one that is risk-based. However, model 2 below can be viewed as one of those iterations that might move an HE sector further towards a fully fledged risk-based approach if required in the future.

Model 1: Using the outcomes of the first rounds of accreditation to refine the standards

This model suggests a full evaluation of the reports to date for both institutional and programme accreditation processes to ascertain the level of challenge for institutions and programmes in relation to each standard. This may lead to reflection on whether standards can be omitted or merged, whether any should be added and/or whether there are standards that should be given more or less emphasis in general during the accreditation process. This may result in a leaner process, either overall (for the whole sector) or as part of a more tailor-made approach where those programmes or institutions that demonstrate a track record of alignment or compliance with all or some of the standards are required only to undergo accreditation against those that are still problematic. An alternative could allow for a longer accreditation cycle for such institutions/programmes but against all the standards.

Pros:

- The evaluation of alignment with standards in the first rounds of accreditation will provide NAQAAE with useful information on the impact of each standard regardless of whether or not there is an intention to move to a leaner process in this way.
- The accreditation process has the potential to become 'lighter touch' at least for those institutions/programmes that demonstrate continued alignment, improvement and strengths against the standards.
- This has the potential to further embed a quality culture as institutions and programmes strive for improvement.

Cons:

- A 'tailor-made' approach where the standards applied to each institution or programme under accreditation, depending on where their strengths and weaknesses are, is potentially lighter touch for those being accredited but more work intensive for NAQAAE.

- Consistency of outcomes will be problematic.

NB: This model may become clearer when considering the merits of model 2 below and any potential to merge aspects of the two models.

Model 2: 'Core plus' model

This model is based on the idea that there are some core standards that will be reviewed in all processes to ensure consistency. These will be supplemented in each review by one or more standards chosen either by the institution/programme or NAQAAE for enhancement or 'checking' purposes (or both). NAQAAE might also periodically specify a standard across all reviews in order to carry out a thematic analysis. Criteria for the choice of supplementary (or thematic) standards may need to be developed.

Pros:

- Weights what are perceived to be the central (most important?) standards.
- Allows institutions and programmes some input into their accreditation, thus ensuring more 'buy-in' and improvement-focused outcomes.
- Less burdensome for some institutions/programmes.
- Provides a stage in the journey towards a more fully risk-based EQA system.

Cons:

- Weights what are perceived to be the central (most important?) standards.
- Allocation of reviewers to panels might be more complicated.
- This model may only be suitable for institutions that have successfully undertaken several reaccreditations. NAQAAE may then need to operate two models of accreditation in parallel.
- No change in burden for some institutions/programmes.

NB: The idea of using the outcomes of programme and institutional accreditation to lessen burden might be built into this model. For example, if an institution demonstrates that its institutional reaccreditations are consistently successful, this might impact on the extent to which full accreditations at programme level are carried out and vice versa. Determinants for 'success' would be needed across each level of accreditation.

Model 3: A continuous (annual) assessment round

A process that is based on a platform that would accept the upload of annually updated documentation each year. This would require a unified system that was used by all HEIs.

This would be more of a rolling process - with triggers from monitoring data that would signal a full review.

Pros:

- Potential lessening of the burden on the institution and on NAQAAE.
- Embeds the culture of quality as it keeps quality assurance and quality enhancement alive throughout the whole accreditation cycle rather than for a year.

Cons:

- Cost and burden.
- Would require a significant revision of process to ensure that the reasons for the documentation were understood.

- Would require a change of approach by reviewers.

NB: Potential to address some of the pros associated with this model by considering the recommendation on follow-up below which would lessen the need for such a root and branch revision as suggested in model 3.

Model 4: A model based fully on the ASG and/or other international standards

This model would focus on a more direct use of the ASG and/or other international standards to be used in national accreditation processes. This is not without precedent. Several countries in the European Higher Education Area have adopted the ESG as their national standards.

Pros:

- National accreditation processes are governed by international standards and evidence of alignment, theoretically, would lead to wide recognition of the outcomes of Egyptian HE.
- A straightforward set of internationally agreed good practice, already in existence, is adopted without any layer of national interpretation.
- The lack of detail encourages institutions to develop their IQA processes in order to provide evidence of meeting the standard - this aligns with the EQA theory of setting out the goal to be achieved but without any precision on how to achieve it.

Cons:

- Such a step would remove the translation of international standards into the national context and would, therefore, ignore one of the central principles of the regional and international frameworks which is that they are a reference point to which the national contexts can adhere rather than a prescriptive set of standards.
- Institutions and programmes may find the lack of national detail unhelpful and confusing rather than liberating.
- The ASG-QA has not yet been fully endorsed by all African states.

NB: There may be some scope in examining the structure and detail of each of the ASG in part B (EQA) to see if any of the Egyptian standards and indicators might be usefully revised or streamlined.

Recommendations

Taking into consideration all the information and discussion that the project provided, four overarching recommendations emerged that may be of value to NAQAAE as it considers the future of its processes, regardless of whether it undertakes major, minor or no revisions.

NB: All of the recommendations are relevant and valid in relation to the consideration of all of the models highlighted above apart, possibly, from model 4. This becomes clear in the detail of each recommendation.

Communication strategy

All participants in the interviews recognised the value of clear communication of the purposes and outcomes of Egyptian accreditation processes, especially internationally. However, there was some feeling that such communication nationally was poor: ' …there is still a lack of trust around the process - it is accepted and acknowledged in the HE sector but

not so well-understood in the wider community'. An example was provided of students from accredited programmes still struggling in the job market.

It is recommended that NAQAAE develops a communication strategy that will increase and widen knowledge about and trust in its work, including the importance of accreditation, what it means and why it is important.

Training and briefing

The theme of communication continues in reflections on the training of reviewers and the briefing of institutions. As has been stated above, NAQAAE carries out both of these activities and yet there were clearly some areas of miscommunication or a lack of understanding that might be remedied through a more rolling programme of training and briefing. For example, reviewers believed that institutions need better briefing in terms of expectations of the accreditation processes including documentation. Reviewers were also unsure of the role of the Technical Committee in relation to the reports they produce - this is a topic that could be covered in reviewer training to ensure that all reviewers are clear about what happens to the draft report and the expectations that NAQAAE has in relation to how its arguments are evidenced and presented.

Institutions believed that it is necessary to recruit more experienced and open-minded reviewers to add to the quality of the process and to '…help it to be better accepted by academics'. In fact, this result might also be achieved through training, as might the request from institutions and programmes to produce accreditation reports more quickly - if reviewers are well-trained in coming to their judgements and in the skills of report writing for accreditation purposes, then a speedier completion of the report should be possible. Institutions and programmes also found some standards vague and in need of clarification (for example, standard 10 Enhancement).

New ways of working and the current revision of the standards for programme accreditation will also necessitate briefing and training to recognise these changes. If revisions are made to the processes for accreditation, then the training and briefing will need to be revised accordingly and updated to reflect a more digitalised and changing society.

In line with NAQAAE's response that training and briefing has been affected by the pandemic, with the last annual conference with workshops for reviewers taking place in 2019, and its recognition of the need for a more continuous input into the training of reviewers and the briefing of HEIs to ensure consistency of understanding of, for example, new developments, this report:

- recommends that NAQAAE review its training and briefing policies and procedures to ensure that they achieve the goals set for them. These should include communication, ensuring shared understanding and the skills required to prepare for an accreditation visit from both reviewer and institutional perspectives. One suggestion is that NAQAAE considers also holding a joint briefing session for institutions undergoing institutional or programme accreditation each year as well as the current individual orientation sessions. This would have added value of encouraging dialogue across the HE sector and between the sector and NAQAAE

- recognises NAQAAE's situation in recruiting suitable reviewers due to the low recompense it can offer. It suggests that NAQAAE rebrand its training sessions and the role of reviewer in general as something of benefit to those who participate in terms of the learning offered, the potential to benchmark one's own institution or programme against others in Egypt and, potentially, further afield due to the implicit inclusion of the ASG in NAQAAE's work.

Follow up

The idea of a 'quality loop' involving reaccreditation and follow up/feedback was highlighted by institutional representatives as an area that could be strengthened in the accreditation process. Participants suggested interim reporting to NAQAAE with suggestions for minor visits, random checks and paper-based processes at key intervals in the accreditation cycle to follow up on the implementation of the action plan. This point was also alluded to in the HAQAA report in relation to the use of recommendations: '…for purposes of continued improvement, NAQAAE should …improve on the follow-up system to ensure that recommendations arising from accreditation activities are comprehensively addressed for further improvement of the higher education'.

There is potential for an enhanced follow-up procedure to feed into any revised, streamlined accreditation process as suggested by a combination of elements in models 2 and 3 above.

It is recommended that NAQAAE evaluate its current processes for follow up and feedback in the light of the role that this might play in encouraging a more streamlined and focused accreditation process.

Balance between internal and external QA

Many options for moving to a risk-based and more 'light touch' approach to accreditation rely on the HE sector's capacity to manage its own quality and standards and on the maturity of their internal QA policies, systems and processes. In such a situation, the balance between IQA-EQA is readjusted with EQA relying more on the expectation that institutions would present their own results and outcomes from their IQA and monitoring processes as part of their evidence base. NAQAAE itself reinforced this idea of institutional responsibility in relation to the standards for accreditation and the NARS, stating that NAQAAE uses such tools as a means of supporting the capacity to self-evaluate, not the capacity to teach.

It is recommended that NAQAAE consider the current capacity of the Egyptian HE sector in relation to its IQA systems with a view to evaluating whether and when a move to a more risk-based approach might be feasible. It is suggested that the recommendations around communication and briefing are also taken into account in this regard since, if a decision is taken to move forward with the development of a more streamlined approach, the sector's understanding of the implications of such a move will be key. Capacity building in the form of workshops or other means might also be something that NAQAAE would wish to consider.

5   Conclusion

Following a relatively short and small-scale scoping study, this report offers initial views on the potential for revision to the NAQAAE accreditation processes. As with most projects of its kind, as an information-gathering exercise, it was immensely useful and served to compartmentalise key areas where NAQAAE processes are working extremely well, and those where there might be some enhancement (see recommendations above).

The report offers recommendations and potential models of evaluation/accreditation for NAQAAE's consideration and suggests that there might be a medium to longer term plan in terms of arriving at a fully streamlined and/or risk-based accreditation model.

The models and recommendations are offered in the spirit of improvement and in the knowledge that NAQAAE will consider them carefully with full knowledge and understanding of its remit, resources and national context.

Appendix 1

Documentation provided by NAQAAE

External documents

- Egypt vision 2030
- HAQAA External Pilot Review Report, March 2019 (Harmonisation of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation project)
- World Federation for Medical Education, Recognition report: 2019
- Relevant laws and by-laws

NAQAAE documentation

- NAQAAE's strategic plan 2016-21 axes, strategic and operational objectives
- Organisational structure
- Presentation: Enhancing Quality at a time of Rapid Change: The Case of Egypt (Prof Y Eid)
- Procedures for accreditation
- Standards for accreditation: HEI

- Institutions' Guidebook
- Standards for Accreditation of Higher Education Programs
- Programme accreditation standards
- Self-Study report template
- Guidelines for conduct of the site visit
- Template and guidelines for external review report

- Internal Quality Assurance policy
- Complaints Policy
- Conflict of interest Policy

Appendix 2

Generic prompt sheet for use in interviews with stakeholders (this sheet was adapted in advance of each stakeholder interview to address that group specifically)

NAQAAE Scoping Study in cooperation with the British Council and QAA UK

Interview with XXX

Introduction

As NAQAAE has already highlighted in its invitation to participate in this interview, as a learning organisation it is seeking to further evaluate and enhance its performance, especially in relation to its accreditation policies, procedures and processes. It is seeking to ensure that these are focused, valuable and as streamlined as possible; the input of NAQAAE's key stakeholders is invaluable in this regard.

Your objective feedback as XXX will be the focus of our short interview. Your views will assist in drafting the report for the project, including the recommendations to NAQAAE.

Feedback will be anonymous insofar as individual names will not be attributed to remarks. I hope that we can work to ensure that the resulting report is as useful as possible to NAQAAE.

I would like to thank you for agreeing to meet with me and for supporting NAQAAE's efforts. I have set out below a framework or 'prompt sheet' setting out the broad topics that I hope to cover during our interview. I hope this is useful in helping you to reflect on NAQAAE's programme and institutional processes but I would stress that no advance preparation is required by you. I am looking forward to meeting you and to hearing your views.

Fiona Crozier, Project consultant

Key topics for discussion

How successful is the current process?
How can it be enhanced?
How can it be streamlined?
How can it be more focused?
What is the main value of going through NAQAAE's accreditation process for you…think in terms of assurance, recruitment, improvement, internationalisation?
Thinking about the standards in particular, are there any that present a challenge?
Any that are particularly useful?
Overall view on the package of standard.
Views on digitalisation and impact of Covid.

Appendix 3

Raw notes from interviews with stakeholders

	Institutional reps	Reviewers	Programme reps	NAQAAE staff
Value and benefit	• Does not mean perfection, happy going in the right direction, have more achievements and meeting goals. • Increase reputation and student recruitment. • Recruitment of students from other countries, more improvement, become more innovative. • Increasing student applications. • Seeking international accreditation. • Internal scheduling.	• The growth in knowledge about QA and its benefits increases over time - student feedback becomes the norm, for example, and monitoring improves. • Accreditation is a loop and the feedback received is important.	• Improves the skills of teaching staff. • Establishes a system of planning for the future; a system and strategy for documenting improvement. Encourages, monitoring, testing and self-reflection. • Seen as complementary to international programme accreditations. • Increases trust in the quality of Egyptian programmes internationally due to NAQAAE ensuring that its standards and processes are in line with international standards and processes - this can be shared with partners and potential partners. • Helps to develop a quality culture.	• Very similar views to those expressed by stakeholders.

			The fact that the judgement is no longer made by the panel but by the Council is an improvement.	
Impact	• Action plan to prepare for next visit will help improvement. • Work on point of weaknesses and develop action plan to teach and assess - the need to show how they have improved in the last five years, be more innovative and productive. • Notes that are of benefit, simulation visits to correct vision to develop curriculum and processes. • Prove they are satisfying these standards. • International reviewers on the panel - think this would be beneficial need to share experience of others. • Need to be accredited with national standards first.	• Importance of reports, recommendations and follow up in terms of the development of the HEI's QA.	• A recognition that this is a continuous process - accreditation does not mean you are suddenly perfect.	• A reminder that NAQAAE's mandate is to ensure the minimum level of requirement. • Impact should be considered in that light. • This project is important in the light of ensuring continued impact into the future, including those undertaking reaccreditation. What is new? What are you doing better? • Ultimate goal is QA for the quality of the programme, not to pass an accreditation.

Digitilisation and COVID-19			
• Technology - helped with uploading docs and replying to Qs. • Parts of visit will be online part in person - very good - reviewers now come to the onsite day more targeted and focused. • Easier to cover everything in a hybrid process. The one day on site can be extended to two days if necessary. • Technology improving and helps with accessing, although more technical support is now needed. • Benefit will help students prepare. • Postponed visits transferred student and staff to online learning training for staff. Online exams and electronic exams. • Efforts to transfer everything online were good. • Pace of digitalisation has increased. Interactive learning management systems Egyptian knowledge bank free training sessions for students and faculty.	• The process for electronic upload is good. • Digitilisation of documentation is a mixed blessing - the quality and quantity of what is uploaded varies from HEI to HEI, (some do not upload the required minimum) with some very practical problems like the scanning and uploading of Excel spreadsheets which can be confusing for reviewers. • However, the fact that documentation can be revised before the visit is good. • Documentation should help reviewers to ask targeted and focused questions and should help NAQAAE and reviewers to identify themes that are emerging across the sector. • Overall a view that electronic upload of documentation, with the increased availability of evidence is enough - post-pandemic, the rest	• NAQAAE and the sector responded to the Ministry to ensure that HE moved online. NAQAAE revised its processes and documents accordingly and did well in establishing a hybrid/online process. • Although the digitilisation and uploading of documentation has its benefits, it is still stressful to ensure that everything has been scanned and uploaded correctly. • NAQAAE did adjust the parameters of their process and sent out a form to be completed as part of the process requesting how the programme had adapted its infrastructure to cope with COVID-19.	• NAQAAE began its process of digitilisation before the pandemic in terms of documentation. COVID-19 pushed the rest of the process into an electronic format. Staff have found the digital or electronic processes much easier. • However the process operates post-pandemic, there is recognition that there might be scope to speed it up. • Also recognition that the processes are not universally well understood. For example, it needs to be made clear that HEIs are not uploading documentation about everything but that what they upload needs to be targeted to the process and the standards so as to provide reviewers with the right documents. (*TRAINING AND BRIEFING).*

	• More preparation of staff and the impact of online on students needs to be increased. Coping with change. • The Ministry has issued decisions to formalise new learning to add hybrid learning methods and assessments. • Distance learning, staff development teaching etc up to date.	of the process should return to normal. • NAQAAE managed the COVID-19 situation well.		• Clear that technology itself is not a goal – the goal is to create a cost-effective accreditation process that meets its objectives, regardless of whether that is an electronic process or not. Digitilisation of documentation is an effective way of collecting the evidence-base as it allows for a time-limited period for collection that is clearly understood. This negates later debate as to what was submitted and when. • Digitilisation of documentation will also enable NAQAAE to develop a data-base of integrated data about each institution that should, ultimately, allow for comparability. (*See also suggestion about year book of good practice*). • NAQAAE has become aware of reviewers asking to observe multiple learning sessions in an online

			environment. There are rules around this that need to be clarified and communicated (*TRAINING AND BRIEFING*).
Standards	• 16 standards to 12. • Difficult to prepare documents the first time. • The systems have been improved since working in 2020. • Standards compatible with medicine. • Teaching and learning compatible with standards. • Meeting the standards is difficult - for example, the standard relevant to human resources - it is difficult to get qualified professors. • Standards are useful as is the report. • To achieve 70% of standard is enough, anything more is good and shows they are in the right direction.	• A range of views: should standards be made more difficult for those that are going through accreditation for the third or more time? Or should the burden be lessened on those institutions and programmes that are starting to demonstrate a track record? (Some feeling that Egyptian HEIs are not yet at that stage, although others were of the view that it would be useful for NAQAAE to consider how to lessen the burden in reaccreditation processes). • Some feeling that no further revisions to the institutional standards are required at present, although it may be useful to look at some of the indicators, for example to the last standard for	• Understanding that if the standards were added to it would increase burden. Agreed that the relative weightings of the standards could be revisited to create a simpler portfolio. • Programme standards have been in place since 2009 and are due a revision. • Some standards, for example, 10 (Enhancement) are too vague and need to be made clearer. • The standard 3 around finance is challenging at programme level. • Programme design (5) is a very useful standard. • General view that the standards that focus on the students and on T&L are the most useful.	• Clarified that there is a set of standards for online and distance learning but that these have not been used in the national accreditation systems where reviewers normally review the context and apply and adapt the regular standards, as necessary. • However, there is some potential to merge these separate standards into the current ones. • Recognition of the value of communicating the purposes and outcomes of accreditation processes, especially internationally. • In response to a suggestion about a standard around the

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		programme accreditation (11. Indicators for programme success). In fact, this could be translated into the institutional standards, not as a standard but as a set of indicators. • There is some repetition in the programme standards.	• NARS: have been updated in 2018 for Medicine and Engineering. Stronger focus on competencies. • Have to show how they work with and apply the NARS in the programme accreditation process - viewed this alignment as an extremely important part of the process. They are the backbone of the whole process and the two updated ones are being integrated in terms of a gap analysis which is helping programmes to revise their curricula. They help with the design of the programme and you must demonstrate that you achieve the minimum set out in the NARS. You can add extra topics to the programme and show how it is distinct but the NARS sets out the bottom line. • The new 2018 NARS have really helped with internationalisation and	process of learning, it is true that there is no solution yet to the problem of assessing learning outcomes and their achievement. However, the accreditation processes should be encouraging institutions and programmes to evaluate, monitor and act on their own results. All institutions now have a Monitoring and Evaluation Unit which has links to the Quality Unit. (*IQA-EQA*). • NARS: not enough resource to work further on these in terms of learning outcomes and competencies. But clear that the NARS and NAQAAE assist with the capacity to self-evaluate, not with the capacity to teach.

			with explaining what they do to international partners - these and the NAQAAE accreditation reports really add flavour.	
Reflections and suggestions	• Platform to accept documentation yearly and upload yearly. • Visit with minimum effort for five-year accreditation. • This would have to be a unified system that all universities used and reviews uploading every year difficult; have minor visit during the five-year cycle for example every two years to follow up on action plan. • Reviewing the visit including revision of all courses and programmes: to see comments of reviewers on courses and programmes. • All activities need to be paid for by each faculty in the university • The QA in each university has to follow up and report to the QA agency	• Clarify the role of NAQAAE's technical committee - why are reviewers asked to clarify their views? • The standards for programme accreditation are not as well developed as those for institutional accreditation. • The focus of accreditation needs to shift from fulfilment of standards to customer satisfaction with more indicators in this area. • More work needs to be done to harmonise the views of reviewers. • Streamlining/lessening of burden - should NAQAAE make it more difficult for institutions going through accreditation for the second or third time? Or lessen the burden? Is Egyptian HE ready for a	• NAQAAE has made a big difference to the HE system in Egypt by introducing the notion of a cycle of continuous improvement through its accreditation processes. • This has introduced notions of feedback, course descriptions, stakeholder engagement etc. • But there is still a lack of trust around the process - it is accepted and acknowledged in the HE sector but not so well understood in the wider community. For example, students from accredited programmes might still struggle in the job market so more communication is needed with employers and the wider community about programme	• Training and briefing: a recognition that training and briefing has been affected by the pandemic (the last annual conference with workshops for reviewers was in 2019) and there is a need for a more continuous input into the training of reviewers and the briefing of HEIs to ensure consistency of understanding of new developments etc. Most training has been online since the start of the pandemic. • A lack of reviewers in some disciplines has led to some of the problems raised by stakeholders (for example, Lack of harmony across reviewer views). *How*

	• Different providers do things differently - sharing of good practice in a year booklet to allow learning from each other to increase the competitiveness.	more streamlined approach? • Random checks in the five years between accreditation visits? • Better briefing for HEIs in terms of expectations of the accreditation processes including documentation. • Continuous training for all those involved - HEIs and reviewers. • Extend the current one day on site to two days.	accreditation, what it means and why it is important. NAQAAE needs to increase wider knowledge about and trust in its work. • NARS: update those that are still using the 2009 versions to ensure a focus on competencies for all disciplines. • The current one day on site should be increased to two days (with one participant requesting that the whole process revert to presential). • Approach to online T,L and A needs to be permanently built into the standards for the future. • Request that the standards reflect a more evidence-based approach to the learning experience - i.e. assess the idea of learning as a process. • Introduce something that helps to reduce the culture of grade inflation.	*to make the role an attractive one.* • This need for a resetting of training and briefing also applies to the role of the Technical Committee (which has a 'job description') - its role is to help reviewers to deliver high quality reports but it has turned into something more judgemental. It is a two-way dilemma - if less experienced reviewers are used, then the role of the TC becomes more important. • There are orientation sessions before each accreditation visit.

			• Revise the programme standards to bring them up to date and to reflect current HE context (including digitilisation and online/hybrid L&T). Need to reflect a changing society. • Recruit more experienced and open-minded reviewers to add to the quality of the process and help it to be better accepted by academics. • Try to produce the reports more quickly. • Train reviewers on the new system of online visits if they persist.	

Additional notes:

Programme reps indicated that if 60% of programmes were accredited then institutional accreditation would be automatically renewed.