Risk-based approach to accreditation visits – policy statement

Introduction

1. The Engineering Council introduced this 'risk-based approach to accreditation visits policy' for accreditation visits informed by a period where remote visits were permitted due to the Covid pandemic. This relates to accreditation of programmes by PEIs against Approval and Accreditation of Qualifications and Apprenticeships (AAQA) or Accreditation of Higher Education Programmes (AHEP) This permits some accreditation activity to be completed through a virtual visit, at the discretion of the Licensee(s) (licensed Professional Engineering Institution(s), hereafter referred to as PEI(s)). In the context of this policy a 'visit' refers to visit activity whether conducted in-person (on site), entirely virtually (with no in-person element) or through a hybrid approach (with a mix of virtual and in person activity).

2. There are also circumstances detailed later in this document where, at the discretion of the PEI:

    a. alternative arrangements may be permitted (as set out below in paragraphs 18 to 24) to consider continued accreditation of programmes that have been subject to significant changes between visits.
    b. the requirement for an accreditation visit may be waived (as set out below in paragraphs 25-29) for programmes with significant commonality to programmes that are already recognised against Engineering Council Standards (AAQA or AHEP) and listed on the Engineering Council course search database.

3. Individual PEIs may decide to complete all or a majority of their accreditation activity in-person.

Visits within the normal accreditation cycle

4. This risk-based approach permits PEIs to organise hybrid visits (which involve some in-person and some virtual activity) and in some circumstances to organise virtual visits. PEIs may continue with entirely in-person visits if they prefer.

5. In some circumstances, as detailed in this document, a visit containing a significant in-person element is mandatory.

6. Whether a visit is entirely in-person, virtual, or hybrid, all requirements of the Regulations for Registration, the applicable Standard (AHEP or AAQA) and relevant Engineering Council guidance[1] must be addressed. Therefore, every visit must include a tour of facilities, review of examples of assessed student work, and meetings with staff and students, whether these are conducted in-person, virtually or in a hybrid format.

7. Hybrid meetings where some participants are at the provider location and others participate remotely should only take place where a strong case has been identified and recorded by the PEI (for example to allow panel members to speak to industrialists who

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[1] The Engineering Council publishes a range of guidance documents related to accreditation; these are published on the Engineering Council's Partner Portal.

are involved with the programme(s), or to enable accreditors with relevant specialist expertise who might not otherwise be able to participate to do so) and with the prior agreement of the visit Chair and secretariat (and those of other PEIs if the visit involves more than one PEI).

8. PEIs must decide and confirm to all participants whether a visit will be in-person, virtual or hybrid at least six weeks in advance of a visit, but ideally at the same time as confirming a visit. It is anticipated that a visit Chair (either an experienced Chair or the Chair confirmed for the visit) may make this decision. Submission requirements will need to ensure sufficient information is provided to allow assessment of whether an in-person or hybrid visit is required, including information needed to assess whether programmes are substantially different to those already accredited.

9. For international visits and visits involving two or more PEIs, the format will ideally be agreed at the same time as the PEIs agree to participate. If PEIs do not agree on whether there should be an in-person element, a hybrid visit could be planned with those PEIs that wish to conduct an in-person visit doing so before or after virtual meetings have taken place, or joining hybrid meetings from the delivery location.

10. For visits (whether in-person, virtual or hybrid) involving two or more PEIs, consideration may be given to whether every PEI needs both an academic and industry assessor, with PEIs having the option to trust the judgement of peers from other PEIs, if they agree that this is appropriate (noting that if either PEI contextualised AHEP or AAQA by setting sector related requirements or learning outcomes this might suggest a need for specialist accreditors).

Visits where a significant in-person element is mandatory

11. A visit containing a significant in-person element is mandatory where one or more of the following apply:

   a. The programme is new to accreditation **and** is substantially different (eg a different discipline without commonality) to previous programmes currently accredited at the provider.
   b. The previous Action Plan contained a **requirement** relating to any inadequacy of physical or staff resources which has not since been confirmed as addressed during an on-site monitoring visit.
   c. A recent visit report indicated issues/concerns in properly monitoring laboratory/workshop provision, with regards to health and safety, or identified from meeting with students, which has not since been confirmed as addressed during an on-site monitoring visit.
   d. An education regulator[2] has raised concerns related to the (overall or engineering) education provided by the provider. PEIs may request details of any relevant audits or other assessments as part of submission documentation.
   e. The provider/department/location (including any franchise or partnership provision being considered for accreditation) has not received an in-person or hybrid accreditation visit previously.
   f. The last full accreditation visit to the provider/department/location did not involve a significant in-person element.
   g. The submission mentions changes (whether to programmes or within the provider - for example to staffing, physical facilities, assessment processes, management

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[2] We have not specified the regulator due to uncertainty and anticipated changes in the UK education regulatory landscape combined with this policy supporting accreditation globally.

of the programme(s) or regulations) that the PEI judges to warrant closer scrutiny through an in-person or hybrid visit.

h. The PEI feels that an in-person or hybrid visit is appropriate for another reason.

Where none of a-h above apply, the visit requirement may be fulfilled through an in-person, hybrid or virtual visit at the discretion of the PEI(s).

12. Visits with a significant in-person element must involve as a minimum each location where accreditation is sought being attended in person by at least two accreditors (one with academic experience and another with industrial experience) for the following aspects of the visit:

a. Meetings with university staff
b. One or more meetings with students
c. A tour of facilities, including laboratories or other locations where practical learning and assessment takes place
d. Meetings between accreditors to consider evidence seen prior to and during the visit and make recommendations to the PEIs on accreditation of the programme(s)

All other requirements for a visit must be addressed, but it is not mandatory to do this in person. Requirements not covered by points a-d may be considered through in-person, virtual or hybrid activity.

13. PEIs may choose to make visits where a significant in-person element is required entirely in-person, or combine significant in-person activity with some virtual activity.

14. In exceptional circumstances (ie where it is temporarily unsafe or not permitted to travel to the location of a provider) the requirement for an in-person element may be waived where it would normally be mandatory. Unless this is confirmed in Engineering Council guidance (as was the case during the Covid pandemic), or the circumstances make it impossible to seek authorisation before the visit is held, RSC authorisation must be secured before a virtual accreditation visit is undertaken. If circumstances make it impossible to secure RSC authorisation before a virtual accreditation visit is undertaken, authorisation must be secured before accreditation is confirmed.

Visits where a significant in-person element is not mandatory

15. In circumstances where a significant in-person element is not mandatory, all requirements for a visit must be addressed, whether an entirely virtual, in-person or hybrid visit is held.

16. Where a significant in-person element is not mandatory an in-person or hybrid visit may be held if the PEI feels this is appropriate, or if the provider makes a request for this and the PEI is happy to accommodate the request. If a PEI feels that a virtual visit is appropriate, they do not have to accept a request from a provider for an in-person or hybrid visit, but may want to consider why the provider has suggested this.

17. PEIs may decide after a virtual visit that an in-person or hybrid visit of some form is required before they can confirm accreditation.

Visits to consider major changes to programmes between the normal cycle of visits

18. PEIs must place a condition on providers to inform them of major changes during the period of accreditation that might affect the delivery of the specified programme outcomes.

19. A variety of factors may prompt providers to update programmes between accreditation visits, for example due to internal restructuring, in response to updates to an Engineering Council Standards review, or to keep provision up to date in response to technological or societal changes.

20. A visit is required to confirm continuation of accreditation to programmes that have undergone a major change in between the normal cycle of accreditation visits, but this may be a light-touch virtual visit (which may be shorter in duration than a full virtual visit) if no more than 50% of the content has changed. In some cases where less than 30% of programme content has changed, the requirement to visit may be waived completely (see information below in paragraphs 25to 3429 on waiving the requirement for an accreditation visit).

21. A light touch visit (which may be entirely virtual) may be used where:
    - between 30% and 50% of the content of a programme has changed during the period of accreditation
    - the programmes are currently accredited and the last full visit to accredit the programme took place within the last three years

22. Evidence to be submitted by the HEI and considered through PEI peer review would include:
    - updated AHEP or AAQA mapping
    - module specifications
    - programme specifications
    - mapping of 'old to new' versions of the programmes being considered
    - overview of changes made
    - action plan update
    - any additional information requested by the PEI

23. This process is for considering changes to programmes <u>between</u> full accreditation visits, and must <u>not</u> be used to consider:
- new programmes
- programmes where more than 50% of the content has changed
- extensions to accreditation

24. Changes to programme title of an existing programme are acceptable, and must be recorded, including on the Engineering Council course search database).

Waiving the requirement for an accreditation visit

25. The Engineering Council's Regulations for Registration include the requirement to visit each location for which programme accreditation is sought, even where the programme is identical. This may, as set out in the Engineering Council's risk-based accreditation policy be an entirely virtual visit in some circumstances. Waiving the requirement for an accreditation visit relates to waiving the requirement for a visit of any format (virtual, in-

person of hybrid).

Paragraph 40 of the Regulations for Registration states:

> Accreditation of a programme of learning confirms that its delivery is recognised at a specific site or sites. The accreditation process shall include a visit by the Licensee to the site of delivery. In certain circumstances the visit may be remote; further guidance is available. Where the same programme is delivered at multiple sites, the accrediting Licensee(s) must satisfy themselves that standards are met at each site for which accreditation will apply. This may require additional visits.

Paragraphs 56-69 refer to waiving the requirement for an accreditation visit:

> A Licensee may waive the requirement for an accreditation visit where the programme concerned has significant commonality with programmes already accredited by the Licensee, and provided that sufficient evidence is available. Such evidence must show that factors which can normally only be reviewed during a visit are satisfactory.
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> Sufficient documentary evidence must be submitted attesting to the:
> • content
> • learning outcomes
> • teaching, learning and assessment
> • human, physical and material resources
> • student entry requirements, and
> • the academic level of new or additional programme(s) content which has not previously been scrutinised by the Licensee.
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> Accreditation without a visit cannot occur where there is a significant difference from what has previously been accredited. If more than 30% of a recognised programme is additional or new, an accreditation visit may not be waived.
>
> Previous evidence/visit reports must not give grounds for any concerns about students' or apprentices' experience, performance, facilities, industrial engagement and validity of programme(s).
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> Any requirements from the previous visit must have been addressed and proven acceptable.
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> Where some of a programme of learning is delivered by a provider or providers other than the awarding institution, the Licensee shall visit those provider(s) as part of any accreditation exercise. The only exception will be where the Licensee can assure itself that systems are in place to ensure that the learning outcomes required by the Licensee are being delivered, or if that part of the programme does not contribute to the final award. A decision not to visit on this basis applies only to that accreditation exercise and does not cover future re-accreditation. The basis for the decision not to undertake a visit must be recorded.

26. A PEI may waive the requirement for an accreditation visit where the programme concerned has significant commonality with programmes already accredited by the PEI, and provided that sufficient evidence is available, including to demonstrate that factors which can normally only be reviewed during a visit are satisfactory.
    - The process must ensure that high standards of accreditation are maintained.
    - Programmes must comply with a current edition of AHEP or AAQA.

- The requirement for a visit must not be waived if there is more than a maximum 30% difference in content from a programme accredited at the last accreditation visit.
- A visit must not be waived if major changes have occurred with regards to department or provider resources or governance since the most recent accreditation visit.
- The provider must provide a good reason for requesting accreditation between the normal schedule of visits rather than awaiting the next round of accreditation.
- After reviewing evidence, the PEI may still require a visit before awarding accreditation.

27. Not undertaking an accreditation visit is expected to be the exception rather than the norm. The default position is therefore that each provider involved in the delivery of a programme will be visited (whether in-person, virtually or through a hybrid visit).

28. The following principles are presented to assist PEIs when making such a decision.

29. For the purposes of such considerations, the term 'provider' includes the delivery provider (which could be for example a university, college, or employer) and any person or organisation external to the delivery provider with a lead responsibility for a significant element of the programme. The awarding organisation may be the same as the provider (as is typical with university degrees) or may be an organisation that awards a qualification delivered by multiple providers.

Principles

30. Confirmation of the following should be sought:

a. The programme is internally validated by the degree awarding institution or subject to appropriate external quality assurance processes by the awarding organisation.

b. A sound framework of engineering-related QA processes is in place for all elements of the programme for which accreditation is being sought, including the setting of standards.

c. If a PEI decides not to visit all providers because the visit to the awarding organisation has provided a sufficient level of confidence about other provider(s):

- The meeting with academic staff will include/included representatives from the awarding organisation and each provider
- The meeting with students will include/included representatives from each year, mode (part-time, full-time, work-based etc) and location.

d. The provider's and awarding organisation's roles in the assessment of student work.

e. The accreditation submission clearly states the responsibility for teaching, and ownership of, the modules; and the contractual relationship between the awarding organisation and the provider(s).

f. Strategies are in place by which the awarding organisation ensures that the standards of delivery across all the associated providers of the programmes are consistent with the standards set by the awarding organisation, and in accordance with Engineering Council's standards and requirements.

<u>Work-based provision</u>

31. Where accreditation is sought for a programme with both campus-based and work-based delivery modes, particular emphasis should be placed on the evidence presented to confirm that the students have a learning experience equivalent to, and to the same standard as, that for students enrolled on campus-based educational courses.

<u>Other considerations</u>

32. PEIs may also take account of:

- The balance between classroom, workplace and laboratory-based provision.

- Any existing accredited status for an externally provided stand-alone course or module.

33. A decision not to visit applies only to that accreditation exercise. A PEI must review the evidence before making a decision not to undertake a visit as part of any future re-accreditation of the programme(s).