

## 'Missing the essential aromas': Interactive online site visits in the international accreditation of teacher education

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Within an accreditation-based approach to quality assurance in higher education, a site visit to an applicant's institution by an accrediting body is the culmination of the evidence-gathering phase of the accreditation process. During the site visit, accreditation representatives conduct standards-related observations and interviews with the applicant and its associates. However, when the pandemic curtailed travel and campuses were forced to close, traditional physical site visits were no longer possible, and were replaced by synchronous online visits. In this qualitative paper, multiple participants reflect on their experiences of participating in a cross-national virtual site visit for the accreditation of teacher education, a novel phenomenon for all parties involved, and a facet of teacher education that has not yet been addressed in the literature. Participating stakeholders, both accreditation body representatives and applicants alike, report many perceived advantages to virtual site visits, but concur that they lack what one key informant termed 'the essential aromas' of teacher education *in situ*. Despite this however, virtual visits are likely to be increasingly common in the future, and in light of this, inferences are drawn for optimising the quality of online interactions in the international accreditation of teacher education.

### Introduction

Accreditation is a recognised measure of academic quality that has been adopted in many contexts of higher education around the world. As an evaluation process which results in a judgment of the extent to which the pre-set standards of an accrediting body have been met (Sato & Abbiss, 2021), it culminates in a physical site visit by representatives of an accreditation body, following which accreditation may be affirmed, deferred, or denied. The purpose of the site visit is to enable the accrediting body's representatives to view the program or institution *in situ* in order to establish the veracity of claims made in the applicant's self-study submission. The visit involves standards-related interviews with stakeholders both internal and external, and the viewing of any additional evidence to that previously submitted in the applicant's self-study report. Traditionally, reviewers appointed by the accrediting body travel to the applicant's site and remain onsite for several days.

When the global pandemic struck, however, travel was curtailed and campuses were closed, and onsite accreditation visits were not possible in higher education at that time. Technology-mediated communication solutions were harnessed to fill the void, primarily through the extensive use of synchronous video conferencing. This paper is a multiparticipant critical reflection on the experience of participating in a virtual site visit for the accreditation of teacher education in an international setting, a novel experience for both the accrediting body and the accreditation applicant alike. Multiple perspectives on the experience of participating in the virtual site visit are presented, including voices

from leaders of the accrediting body and from a range of stakeholders at the applicant's side, as well as the voices of the authors of this paper as two faculty members who co-led phases of the application for accreditation. The teacher education program in this case is based in a public university in one of the Gulf states, where, as discussed below, international accreditation is a governmental expectation, and the accrediting body is a US-based recognised professional body for the accreditation of teacher education in North America and internationally.

We begin this paper with a brief look at the emerging literature on virtual site visits for program accreditation in higher education, followed by a review of the literature on the affordances and constraints of live video conferencing as a substitute for real-world interactions. Following that, quality assurance and accreditation within higher education in the Gulf states and within teacher education are discussed.

## Literature review

From the outset, it should be noted that no published studies could be located on the topic of online accreditation site visits within teacher education. We turned, therefore, to an adjacent field of university-based professional preparation - medical education - where some relevant literature has started to emerge. Reporting from the context of a graduate health management program, for example, Bhavsar et al. (2021) emphasises that the key to a successful virtual visit is the establishment of trust, based on strong communication among the site visit team members, as well as between the site visit team and the applicant for accreditation. However, the virtual format mitigates against this, with none of the shared social gathering opportunities, such as sitting down for lunch together, which create "an informal atmosphere for everyone to be comfortable" and thus in online accreditation meetings "may not necessarily be able to build the same level of trust as those who meet face-to-face" (Bhavsar et al., 2021, p. 394). On the other hand, the participation of external stakeholders was reported to be stronger than in physical site visits. The economic benefits of a virtual visit for both the accreditors and the accreditees are also noted by Bhavsar et al. (2021), and these include, for example, reduced or zero transportation, hotel accommodation, and catering costs. On the other hand, the increased importance of technical assistance and the necessity of regular scheduled breaks to reduce online fatigue during online site visit meetings were also reported. On balance, a blended model with a combination of physical and synchronous virtual site meetings is recommended for medical education by Bhavsar and colleagues (2021).

Similarly, reporting from the field of nursing education, Colbourne and Shellanbarger (2021) offer practical tips for successful virtual site visits, including recommendations for the use of virtual spaces for shared documentation and the use of pre-recorded video materials, alongside live, interactive video conferencing. An additional point worth highlighting from the sparse literature on conducting online accreditation is that physical site visits come with a price for the planet, especially if international travel is involved, as virtual visits are more carbon-neutral than *in-situ* visits (Rumbley, 2020).

At a more general level, several studies have investigated the disruption to higher education processes wrought by the pandemic, although none are directly related to accreditation processes. For example, participants in Scarlota and Knipp's (2022) study into Chilean higher education EFL teachers' experiences of online teaching during the pandemic reported a perceived decrease in participation and interaction, and time and health issues on the one hand, alongside convenience, accessibility of information, increased flexibility, and adaptability of teachers on the other hand. Moreover, the move to online and blended higher education environments requires access for all participants to sophisticated technological infrastructure, a factor which was reported to inhibit the efficacy of blended learning for students in higher education during the pandemic in some locations around the world. (Heng et al., 2023).

### **Social presence, social space, and sociability in video conferencing**

To frame the participants' voices which follow in the data section of this paper, we first turn to the literature on the psychological and social experience of participating in synchronous video conferencing meetings. Social presence in technology-mediated interpersonal communication was originally theorised as the 'realness' of people in an interaction. As such, in the pre-Internet era of telecommunications, social presence was simply defined as the "degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationship" (Short, Williams & Christie, 1976, p. 65). Since then, online social presence has been reformulated as "the psychological phenomenon in which ... the other persons are perceived as physical "real" persons in technology-mediated communication" (Kreijns, Xu & Weidlich, 2022, p. 141). The related concept of social space, described as "the network of interpersonal relationships embedded in group structures of norms and values, rules and roles, and beliefs and ideals" is also relevant insofar as it facilitates or mitigates against a "sense of community, group climate, mutual trust, social identity, and group cohesion" (Kreijns, Xu & Weidlich, 2022, p. 141). Another relevant construct is sociability, which refers to affordances for the expression of social presence within the virtual social space (Kreijns, Xu & Weidlich, 2022). Importantly, cognitive presence is also a key element in education-related virtual contexts and has been characterised as "the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse in a critical community of inquiry" (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001, p. 11). In the context of an online accreditation site visit, instead of 'learners', the actors are various participant stakeholders, including program leaders, faculty and staff members, student support service representatives, students, alumni, and school-based partners, as well as the visiting team of peer reviewers representing the accreditation body.

As a substitute for real-world interactions, then, video conferencing platforms enable social presence and cognitive presence and foster sociability in the virtual space. Synchronous online interactivity is perceived to be closest to real-life interaction (Hacker et al., 2020) and facilitates knowledge-sharing and trust building<sup>1</sup> (Zander et al., 2013). As

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, accreditation has been translated as "trustworthiness" in Arabic (Michelli & Eldrige, 2017, p. 229).

the preferred medium for transmitting complex information (Hacker et al., 2020), video conferencing enables “meetings that could not have taken place otherwise” (Hacker et al., 2020, 5p. 64). Similar to other synchronous video communication applications that came to the fore during the pandemic, the *Zoom* app enables synchronous collaboration between multiple participants. It accommodates oral and visual and textual presence, as well as enabling screensharing, and can be run on any mobile or fixed device. It was the chosen platform for the virtual accreditation site visit, due to its ubiquity and ease of access for participants in multiple locations.

Although synchronous video conferencing enables the bridging of geographic distance between participants in online meetings, temporal distance remains a challenge. For synchronous international communication across time zones, there are a reduced number of overlapping work hours for collaboration (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020). In addition to spatio-temporal distance between meeting participants, there is also perceived distance which has both affective and cognitive dimensions and relates to participants’ sense of a shared identity (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020). In a virtual synchronous international site visit, where multiple local stakeholders participate in online meetings with representative of an external accrediting body, perceived distance can be significant and can mitigate against smooth communication.

### **Quality assurance in higher education**

Turning now to the literature on quality assurance in higher education, the concept of ‘quality’ which has migrated from the world of industry to the world of education was originally associated with customer satisfaction with a product or service. From the 1990s onwards, under the influence of global neoliberal economic agendas, pressures for accountability, and the desire to compete in the international knowledge economy, a culture of quality assurance is now commonplace in international higher education (Altbach et al., 2010) and is typically comprised of two elements: “a desire for accountability (*is the program designed to meet requirements and does it meet minimum outcomes?*) and for enhancement (*does the program evaluation suggest areas of improvement?*)” (Sato & Abbiss, 2021, p. 24).

### **Accreditation and accountability in higher education**

One way of demonstrating quality and complying with accountability requirements is through accreditation which involves the establishment of the “status, legitimacy or appropriateness of an institution, programme or module of study” (Harvey, 2021). While there are different types of accreditation systems, all follow a similar set of procedures: against pre-set standards, external peer reviewers acting on behalf of an accrediting body review an institution or a program based on the institution’s own self-evaluation; provide formative feedback; and then conduct a summative site visit to the institution, following which recommendations are made to the accrediting body. Typically, several consecutive cycles of program data are required to show evidence of both adherence to a set of standards and a systematic approach to continuous program improvement. For teacher education accreditation, standards are typically met through the provision and analysis of

data on the following areas: students' acquisition of content and pedagogical knowledge and skills; school-based partnerships for practice teaching; program admission, progression, and support mechanisms; graduate employment and impact; and quality assurance and continuous improvement procedures.

### **Quality assurance and higher education in the Gulf**

Quality assurance is considered by regional leaders to be vital for the educational reputation of Gulf states, where higher education is still young. In the UAE, for example, quality in higher education is considered a priority by the country's education authorities (Ashour, 2020). There are several reasons for this. Firstly, a strong system of education is seen to be essential not only for the region's economic future, but also for the "security and the maintenance of the strategic equilibrium" of the Gulf countries (Mawgood, 1999, p. 11). Second, there are government expectations of accountability and value for the "enormous domestic public investment" (Knight, 2014, p. 54) which has been made in higher education. Thirdly, quality assurance is believed to confer national and global recognition for the developing higher education sector. Fourthly, the extremely rapid quantitative growth in student and institution numbers, along with the marketisation of higher education in the region, has raised concern about the rigour of entrance requirements and academic policies (Wilkins, 2010), and quality assurance systems are seen as a control mechanism to counterbalance such forces.

### **Quality assurance and teacher education in the Gulf**

Teacher education internationally is typically housed within higher education institutions and is therefore subject to whatever quality assurance systems apply to higher education in a particular context (Sato & Abbiss, 2021). In addition to securing local accreditation through their home institutions, publicly funded higher education programs in the Gulf, including teacher education programs, are often expected by governmental authorities to additionally pursue international accreditation (Romanowski, 2022). While there are different approaches to quality assurance in higher education internationally, certification by US-based accreditation systems tends to be favoured in the Gulf region. Yet, pursuit of external international accreditation for teacher education in the region is a challenging and contested enterprise. In the UAE, for instance, the process has been described as "long and arduous" and a "struggle" (Michelli et al., 2017, pp. ix-x). Indeed, attitudes towards the external accreditation of teacher education in the region are mixed, and even sometimes hostile. For example, a survey of the attitudes of faculty and staff in a university in Qatar revealed strongly opposing views as to its perceived utility (Alkhateeb & Romanowski, 2021). On the other hand, Alshebou (2018, p. 367) has described teacher education in Kuwait as "inward-looking, nationally oriented, and narrow" and has called for internationally informed program accreditation measures to redress this. Support for international accreditation for teacher education in the region has also come from Bahrain, with Bailey (2021) noting that the accreditation process can be a catalyst for reform in teacher preparation and development.

## **Conceptual framework, research questions, methods**

We now turn to the conceptual framework and methodology underpinning this study. Taking an interpretivist perspective on inquiry (van Manen, 2016; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018), we sought to address the following questions:

- What sense do we as reflective practitioners make of the experience of undergoing a virtual site visit?
- What sense do key informants, as participant stakeholders, make of the experience of virtual site visits?
- What directions can our combined reflections suggest for teacher education accreditation site visits in the future?

The study is grounded in reflection as a signature practice in teacher education. Reflective practice has enjoyed an enduring prominence in this field, since Dewey highlighted reflection as the “active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and further conclusions to which it leads” (Dewey, 1933, p. 118). Reflective practice is also readily associated with Schön (1983) who distinguished between reflection-in-action (thinking while doing) and reflection-on-action (after-the-event thinking).

Following Vygotsky (1978), we assume that knowledge is socially constructed, and that meaning is made through interaction with others in specific contexts of practice and inquiry. In this regard, the community of inquiry model, which supports the collaborative construction of personal meaning and shared understanding, underpins this investigation (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001; Garrison, 2017). This framework emphasises the establishment and maintenance of social presence and cognitive presence in virtual encounters. Within the tradition of collaborative self study in teacher education (Kitchen et al., p. 2020), we sought to augment and amplify our own insights as program leaders by eliciting the reflections of other key participants. We purposefully selected participants as “information-rich cases” who yield “insights and in-depth understanding” (Patton, 2015, p. 264) and who had “[similar lived] experience of the phenomenon being studied” (Creswell, 2013, p. 155). From the applicant’s side, the voices of the authors as program-based accreditation application leaders are augmented by the voices of faculty, staff, and school-based partners, while from the US-based accrediting body side, the voices of a senior accreditation leader and of a site review team leader are presented. Participants’ reflections on the shared experience of the virtual encounters were sought one year after the event (the online site visit occurred during Fall 2020) through a variety of communication channels, as appropriate for each key informant, including face-to-face interviews, phone calls, online meetings, and emails. The prompt was open-ended, and simply invited their reflections on the experience of participating in the online site visit, both positive and negative. Institutional ethical procedures were followed in the conduct of the research.

## Findings

We begin this data section with reflective statements by the two authors of this paper, to convey our positionality and to provide our perspectives.

### First author reflection

As the associate dean and chair of the college accreditation committee from the submission of the self-study until the end of the entire process, I was heavily involved in preparing for the site visit, firstly collaborating on a detailed plan for a physical visit before the pandemic, and then switching to planning for a virtual visit when it was not possible to conduct the visit onsite as usual. For this I worked closely with the dean and the college's administrative team as well as with faculty members who had led the preparation of the evidence for the various standards. The accrediting body provided a list of 18 different stakeholder groups they wished to interview during the visit. With an average of 5 participants per group, setting up and managing the online participation of approximately 90 people was a challenge. Finding stakeholders who were willing to participate in online interviews and gaining their commitment to show up on *Zoom* at the right time required considerable effort.

Visits to partner school sites had been a key component of the original onsite visit plan, where the reviewers would meet school principals and mentor teachers, and interview them about the quality of our programs, as well as observing candidates teaching practice lessons and meeting program graduates as teachers in the field. However, with schools closed, such visits were cancelled and the contextualised experience of observing teacher education *in situ* was lost, although school principals, mentor teachers and teacher candidates did participate in the online interviews. In retrospect, had we been preparing from the start for a virtual site visit, we could have created short video clips of key partner schools, just as we had done to showcase our own campus facilities. In terms of logistics, we were fortunate to have an excellent administrative team in our college who did an incredible job of setting up the whole series of online interviews. Moreover, I had met with the site visit team leader in person at an accreditation conference in the US previously, and she had conducted pre-visit online planning meetings with myself and the dean, so the ice had been broken and we had established mutual trust before the actual online visit. As a result of this, and due to the hours upon endless hours of work which had gone into the accreditation effort (and which stole my research productivity away for a year or so!), by the time of the actual online site visit, I was feeling very relaxed about it and enjoyed speaking with the accreditors about the excellence of our programs.

### Second author reflection

I had been involved with accreditation in our college right from the beginning of the process, but I wasn't involved with the organisation of the site visit because I was in a different role at the time. All I could see was a mountain of organisation being done in the dean's office, and I was very glad that they had such good administrative assistants working with them. Prior to Covid, we had actually all been looking forward to the onsite

visit and had spent quite a bit of time planning that. Sometimes it's hard to explain the cultural context, and that's probably one of the things we found most challenging throughout the accreditation journey – sometimes we felt a bit like we were trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. I think we had been looking at this site visit like our opportunity to finally show the site visitors the real situation on the ground, and that that would help them to understand the context better. The teacher candidates are what makes our program and bring personality to the program on the ground. It almost felt like our *viva voce*, and of course we wanted to do it in person.

We were also looking forward to showing them hospitality, as that is a huge part of the culture here. We wanted them to experience a really nice few days, knowing that they would be working very hard having travelled all this way from the US, and we had already worked hard on the logistics. So overall, I was disappointed that the site visit was going to be taking place virtually. I thought we wouldn't be able to build up the relationships that we hoped to. However, I guess because we were used to going to accreditation conferences and had already met a couple of the senior representatives before, meeting with them virtually wasn't all that strange, and actually I would say the whole thing ended up being much more efficient than it would have been had we been in person. There was much less involvement needed than if they had been here in person, because we would have been feeling responsible for the hospitality/ hosting side, and I'm pretty sure meeting times would not have run as efficiently, nor would we have had as many participants able to join in.

#### *The author perspectives*

It is clear that Author 2 felt a sense of loss at not being able to showcase the quality of teacher candidates in person, and also felt the absence of getting to know the site visitors during the cultural outings. However, she could see the benefit of the virtual site visit in terms of accessibility and logistical convenience, because meetings were easier to coordinate using the virtual tools. For Author 1, the challenges lay in the amount of preparation and liaison required for the virtual visit, and while the impossibility of visiting schools was a loss, the actual experience of participating in the virtual visit was a smooth and enjoyable one. She was grateful for the planning and communicative strengths of the site team review leader, and she relied on the support of the administrative team, on collaboration with the dean as co-organiser, and on supportive faculty members to make it all work. As such, we now turn to the voices of other key stakeholders who participated in the virtual site visit phenomenon.

#### **Key informant 3: Administrative officer**

A key participant from the institution's side was the college's administrative officer who set up and managed the online meetings and liaised with the university's IT services to ensure the smooth technological functioning of the online visit. When interviewed for this study, she noted that, as the college had planned for an onsite face-to-face visit which could not proceed due to the pandemic, there was a lot of pressure to prepare for the unknown scenario of an online visit. Given that there was no prior experience of using *Zoom* to host concurrent meetings with multiple external participants, her primary concern



was to ‘ensure there were no technical glitches.’ Together with her colleague, she held preparatory meetings with the IT department to understand the functionality of breakout rooms, as the accreditors had requested several parallel, virtual rooms: one private breakout room for the accrediting team, one for administrative support, and private rooms for concurrent focus group interviews. With her colleagues, she ran trial focus group meetings in advance to ensure the smooth functioning of these breakout rooms during the actual virtual visit. ‘That really helped us imagine how it would be during the actual visit’, she said. ‘You know, you click on that, you have to move there ...’

In retrospect, she was pleased that everything ‘went smoothly, more than expected’, noting the excellent IT staff, infrastructure, and intranet capacity at the institution. There were inevitably some challenges during the meetings, such as external stakeholders needing her assistance to access the meeting link, and reviewers occasionally being confused about which meeting room link they needed to follow. On the negative side, she commented on the inconvenience of working from home due to the pandemic and finding a quiet space away from her family for running the meetings. She also noted the difficulties of working outside regular office hours due to the time zone difference between the US and the Gulf, as there was a limited period each day where meeting schedules were manageable for participants from both time zones. Overall, she concluded that

I would say it was a great solution for what we had, for that specific situation. It’s a nice tool to use when we need it. But I couldn’t say we should 100% depend on just a virtual site visit. When it’s virtually, you feel like there might be miscommunication. There are some missing pieces, for example, they only just spoke with people around specific questions with specific answers, but if we met them, they would see something else also. They would see how we live every day, how we work, how education is implemented, they will see the schools ... they would experience another kind of side.

#### **Key informant 4: Field experience coordinator**

Increasingly, teacher education in the Gulf is characterised by strong university-school partnerships and extensive teaching practice in the field (Gallagher, 2019), following international trends, and therefore the college’s field experience coordinator was considered a key informant for this study. Liaising extensively with schools, she helped assemble school-based partners for online interviews with the accreditation teams. She noted that school partners found it much more convenient to attend virtual meetings than in-person meetings. Sometimes different stakeholders with differing work schedules needed to be invited to the same online meeting, and due to the convenience of each participant being able to join from home, it was much easier to coordinate their availability. She also observed that student teachers were very competent participants during the online meetings, probably because they had grown used to synchronous interactive online classes since the start of the pandemic and had been engaging in teaching practice online while schools were physically closed.

**Key informant 5: School-based leader**

A partner school-based leader who participated in the site visit was also interviewed for this study. She reported that, in terms of the exchange of information during her focus group meeting alongside other school leaders, there was no tangible difference between an online and onsite meeting. She said that in general she feels comfortable with online meetings and found this experience to be no different, finding that it's easy to get tasks completed, but noting she misses the body language and in-person eye contact. She did mention that she had a long-standing relationship over eight years with the university as a partner school, so she felt very comfortable talking about the program in detail. She found the interviewers to be skilful and professional in asking questions, remarking on how friendly they were, how the questioning technique was smooth and organised, and that they were great listeners. However, had they been able to visit in person, she would have enjoyed physically showing them files and photos as additional evidence, even though that didn't appear to be necessary for the interviewers, adding that 'We like to share, we like to show and tell, but there's no chance to do that. The hard copies can be powerful!'

**Key informant 6: School-based mentor teacher**

A school-based mentor teacher who participated in the virtual site visit was also interviewed for this study. She felt that, in the virtual space, the essence of the encounter was lost because being virtual, the camera comes between you and the other person. She felt that the whole experience was very cold and that, had the interviews been in person, participants would have got more from it from an emotional perspective. She said, 'It's just missing that something extra that you would have got if you had had a real life visit instead of an online one.' She also mentioned that she generally doesn't enjoy online meetings in the first place, and, unlike the school principal, not knowing any of the other participants involved meant that she didn't feel comfortable in the virtual space.

**Key informant 7: Faculty member**

On the other hand, a faculty member involved in the site visit felt that the online platform allowed for a more balanced distribution of input from all participants, reducing the tendency she sees for 'certain participants to dominate and take most of the time' in real-world meetings. She also noted the time efficiency in holding back-to-back meetings with various stakeholder groups. Thirdly, like other participants, she commented on the convenience of online interviews for school-based university partners who might not have been able to attend an on-campus meeting, thus increasing the quantity and quality of evidence-based input from stakeholders.

**Key informant 8: Accreditation body leader**

From the side of the accreditation body, a senior accrediting body representative believed that, overall, there are more positive aspects to virtual site visits than negatives, based not just on the international site visit that is the subject of this paper, but on the accumulated experience of 200 virtual site visits conducted since the start of the global pandemic. From

her perspective, there is no loss of rigour or diminution of quality with virtual site visits, compared to physical visits. She reported that institutions undergoing accreditation are favourably disposed to virtual visits, due to their logistic convenience. With no visiting team descending on the institution, the complex logistical arrangements associated with hosting a physical visit are gone, such as arranging for accommodation, multiple meeting rooms, ground transportation, catering, and so forth. As such, a virtual visit reduces the institution's financial outlay associated with accreditation, she noted.

Furthermore, the accrediting body has found that virtual site visits engender greater participation by external stakeholders. As no campus attendance is asked of them, busy school-based mentor teachers and principals and educational authority representatives find online participation much more convenient. A related advantage is that there can be wider representation across campuses for multi-site institutions, without the need to travel to one central location.

Alongside these affordances, however, this key informant also reported constraints for both the accrediting body and the institutions undergoing accreditation. Many reviewers are unhappy with conducting virtual site visits because the main perk - perhaps the only perk, as reviewers are not paid - is the loss of opportunity to travel to remote sites. The Gulf in particular is seen as an exotic and attractive location to visit. Moreover, from the perspective of institutions undergoing accreditation, she mentioned that concerns have been expressed to the accrediting body about how they feel that their unique contexts are not easily represented through virtual modalities. Institutions feel that when the full context in which their teacher education program is situated is not experienced by the reviewers, their milieu cannot be properly understood or appreciated.

This key informant also noted how gender-related role conflicts can arise for reviewers when conducting a virtual site visit from home. Most site reviewers are female (because most educators and most teacher educators, and hence most evaluators, are female) and they often struggle to find uninterrupted space at home. This situation was acute during the pandemic when reviewers who are parents had to contend with school-age children at home. Age-related gender role conflict issues were also reported. While younger evaluators often experienced conflicts with pandemic-related childcare arrangements, older peer reviewers reported conflicting demands between conducting online site visits from their homes and caring for elderly family members.

#### **Key informant 9: Site visit review team leader**

Each accreditation application is assigned a review team by the accrediting body, comprised of trained, expert, voluntary peer reviewers associated with the accrediting body. Each review team is led by an experienced team leader who liaises with the program or institution seeking accreditation before and during the visit and leads the actual site visit. The views of the review team leader who led the virtual site visit in this case were elicited, as a key informant with extensive experience of both onsite and virtual review visits.

The fundamental insight she shared was the need to intentionally build mutual trust in advance of the virtual site visit, to compensate for the loss of the informal relationship-building opportunities that would accompany a physical site visit. She noted that

For everyone, building relationships in an online environment must be intentional in preparation for the eventual site visit. When in a face-to-face environment, team members, for example, could rely on the shared time during a site visit (arrival, meals together, walking to meetings . . .). In a virtual environment, I've added at least one additional meeting in preparation for the site visit that I had not done before.

She also highlighted the advantages of video conferencing between program leaders and the accrediting team leader during the pre-visit planning phase:

Before virtual meetings, I often relied on email or the phone. I think the video conferences have been a positive. For any type of visit, good planning will make all the difference. In both face-to-face and online environments, we need to have a well-orchestrated schedule because of the number of interviewees. [The] need for a good schedule has not changed.

Another affordance as a review team leader is efficiency of time. Comparing in-person to online conferring by the site visiting team members at the end of each day, she noted that 'the time together during a site visit has been reduced. I remember hours of debriefing at the end of day of interviews. Now I limit them to two hours.'

Despite these advantages, however, this key informant was clear that the loss of first-hand experience of the program's context is the major constraint of virtual visits. She noted that

The biggest loss . . . is the loss of cross-cultural exchanges. The ability to visit in someone else's home environment brings a level of understanding that I think we miss out on in a virtual world. It's like trying to understand baking bread without smelling it. I might know the ingredients, temperature, time - but I am missing the essential aromas. I believe that the field of education benefits from being a guest in someone else's space. We have to be on our best behavior, take in what is around us, listen, learn, and try to understand. In a virtual environment it is too easy to dismiss 'the other' - and I think that is a loss for the profession.

Indirectly related to the virtual site visit is the increased volume of documentation and data submitted by institutions, facilitated by technology, all of which has to be read by the site visit team. She observed that:

As for the content of reports, I think the online use of materials has expanded exponentially in the past 10 years. [Applicants] are generating too much material - and it is a huge burden for reviewers who should be reading everything submitted. This is a problem for accrediting agencies to fix.

On the other hand, new digital communication channels have provided her with a welcome new mode of communication with her review team members. She now uses

group instant messaging – ‘something I never would have thought of three years ago’ – to keep in touch during the site visit and during report writing afterwards.

## Discussion

The variety of different perspectives presented above indicates that despite their varying roles within the site visit, many of the participants had similar thoughts about the process. Having been thrust into emergency distance learning, and having had it continue for so long, it was not surprising to hear that a school-based informant felt fatigued by online events. There is a palpable sense of ennui among those involved in teaching online classes, where teachers and students feel they are missing out on physical connection. Those who had already had a relationship with at least some of the other participants felt more comfortable within the virtual site visit, such as the authors, faculty member, field experience coordinator, and the accreditation representatives. The mentor teacher felt that, overall, it was a cold experience. Based on this, the affective and cognitive dimensions of perceived distance outlined by Morrison-Smith and Ruiz (2020) appear to come into play for the mentor teacher, mitigating against smooth communication.

Most participants mentioned that the personal touch was missing, that while the task was completed successfully, the interpersonal interaction and cultural experience was missing. For example, the school leader expressed her wish to share physical evidence. One of the authors mentioned the sense of loss from a social and cultural perspective, not having that opportunity to show in-person evidence on campus. The sociability factor was missing for all participants, and while most did experience mutual trust, only the most involved participants felt a sense of community, group climate, and group cohesion.

Those participants involved in the organisation, such as the administrative assistant, field experience, authors, and site visitor, all acknowledged the benefits of being able to host meetings online, especially where otherwise it might have been difficult to coordinate physical meetings at specific times. In this sense, participants overwhelmingly identified the positive aspect of video conferencing for enabling these meetings, as otherwise the visit may not have been able to take place at all (Hacker et al., 2020), delaying the award of accreditation.

## Conclusions

Overall, we would recommend a blended approach to international accreditation post pandemic, starting with relationship-building before the online interviews, followed by one or two reviewers conducting a short site visit to establish trust and to have an authentic experience of the context. Planning, preparation and extensive pre-visit communication are vital, and flexibility around working hours is needed for online interviews. Because quality is strongly conditioned by contextual and cultural features, the loss of first-hand reviewer experience of the context in which programs are located could potentially be compensated for through technology, such as go-pro walkthroughs of the program facilities and selected partner school sites.

In the longer term, given predictions that we will increasingly live our personal and professional lives in the metaverse, a gradual move to fully virtual approaches to international accreditation might be anticipated. Ultimately, governmental authorities which depend on external accreditation bodies to assure them of the quality of higher education must be satisfied that the quality of the quality assurance process itself can be maintained in virtual online environments. To ensure this, standards for the conduct of online site visits can be prepared, for which the findings from the present study may be informative.

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