

# SHORT- AND LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON ACCREDITATION PRACTICES

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On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, sending millions of people into a remote working environment and challenging the way everyday business was conducted, including higher education institutions (HEI) and accrediting organizations. As the delivery of higher education was moved to a virtual environment, institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations had to adjust expectations and navigate accreditation reviews that respected social distancing and remote working environments, while adhering to the requirements and expectations of the U. S. Department of Education (USDE).

In March 2020, USDE began issuing guidance in the form of waivers for HEI's and accrediting organizations. These waivers allowed for flexibility in the mode of educational delivery and the conduct of accreditation reviews. The USDE advised HEI's and accrediting organizations that the waivers were unique to the specific circumstance surrounding COVID-19 and should be considered temporary. Waivers included allowing for the provision of distance education by institutions not previously approved to offer distance education by their accrediting organizations, and the temporary use of virtual site visits by accrediting organizations with the expectation that an in-person visit would occur after the lifting of the COVID-19 emergency. These allowances enabled HEI's to offer uninterrupted education to enrolled students and provided accrediting organizations the opportunity to adjust their practices and to implement technologies not previously used as part of the accreditation process.

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) conducted a survey in Fall 2021 that was sent to the 24 institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations recognized by both USDE and CHEA. The purpose of the survey was to learn more about changes to accreditation practices that were made specifically to accommodate the COVID-19 emergency and to ascertain whether any of these changes will remain after the emergency has passed. Eighteen accrediting organizations responded to the survey. All 18 respondents indicated that they took advantage of the waivers offered by USDE and put in place other temporary practices. Figure 1 reflects the types of changes that were instituted by accrediting organizations to accommodate the COVID-19 emergency. Site visits, conferences, workshops, trainings, and decision-making meetings were all identified as activities that required more flexibility.

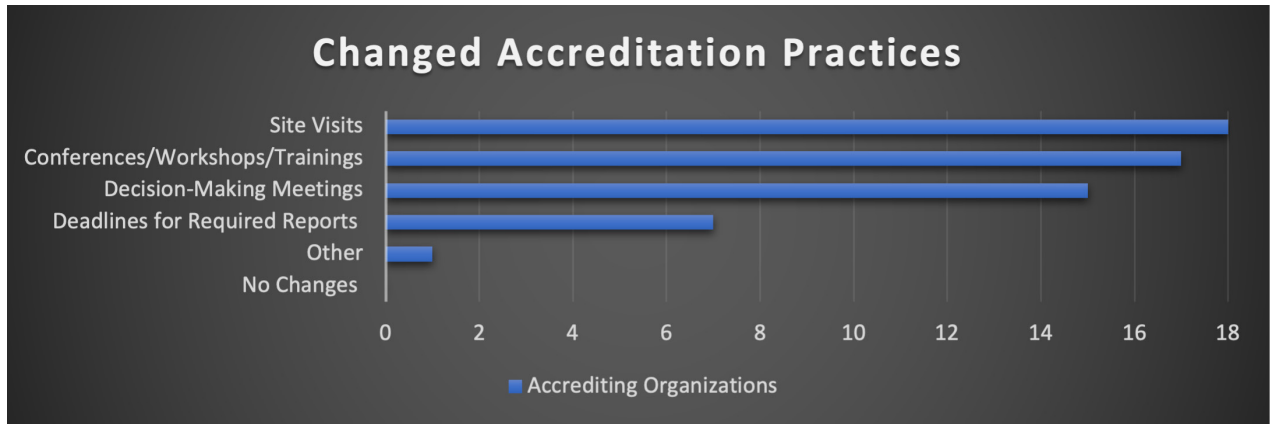


Figure 1 - Responses to Survey Question #1: Please select all accreditation practices that were changed during COVID-19.

Each of the 18 accrediting organizations indicated that site visits and decision-making meetings were moved to a virtual environment using remote technologies. Seventeen accrediting organizations responded that conferences, workshops, and trainings were moved to an online format (See Figure 2).

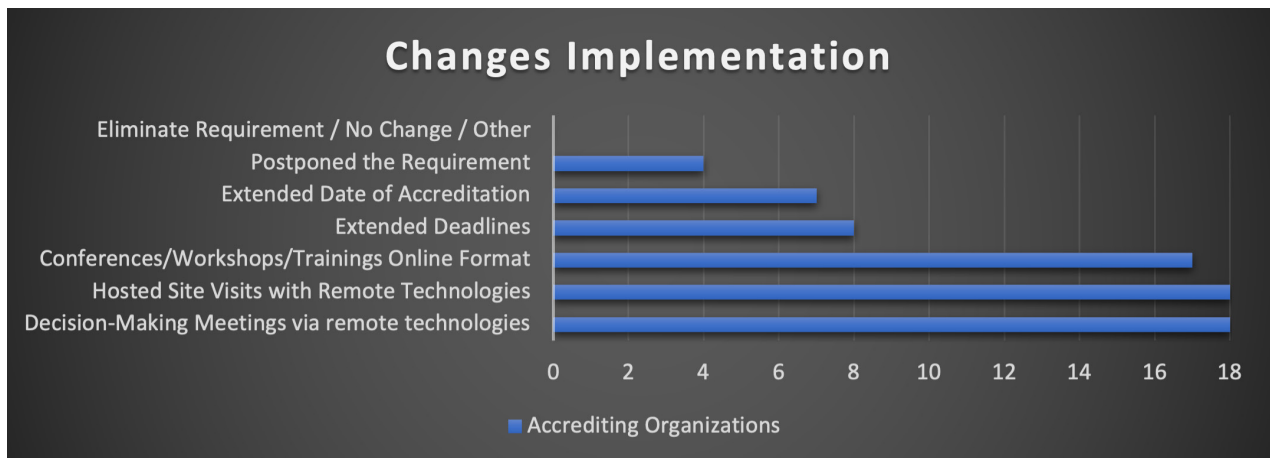


Figure 2 - Responses to Survey Question #2: Based on your response to Question #1, please select the changes that were implemented.

As site visits were moved to a virtual environment many changes were made and Figure 3 reflects some of the changes that were implemented. The most common modifications were made to policies and/or procedures and the specific training needed for the use of remote technologies. As site visits moved to the virtual environment, the costs associated with these visits were adjusted. One accreditor commented that while the implementation of video technology allowed for reviews to continue with minimal timeline disruption, virtual visits were not the same and looked forward to returning to in-person visits.

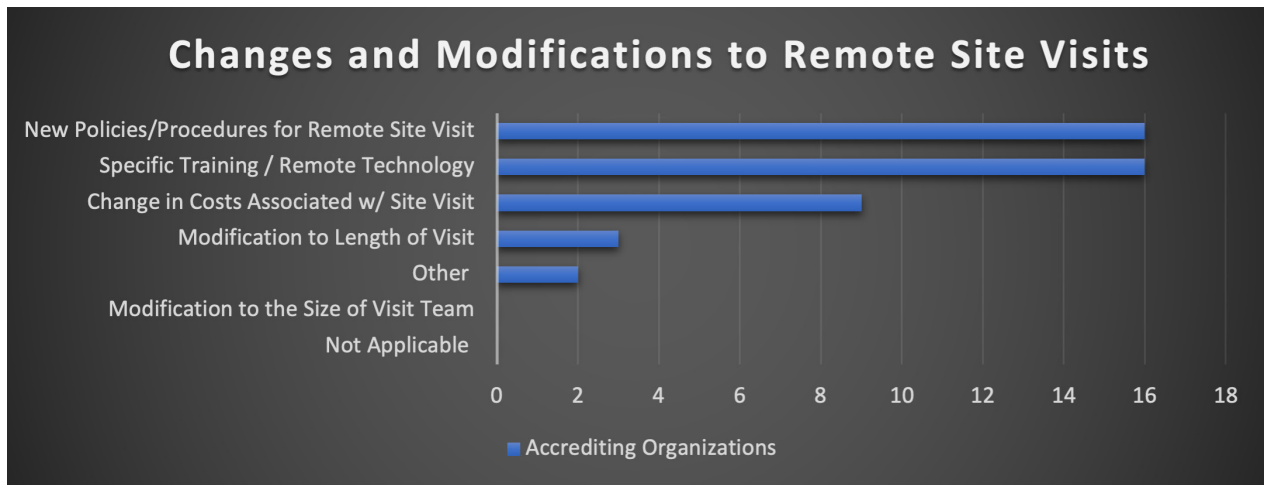


Figure 3 - Responses to Survey Question #3: If your accrediting organization hosted site visits remotely, please indicate changes/modifications that were implemented to conduct these site visits remotely.

The ability to conduct on-site visits using remote technologies allowed HEI's to engage in accreditation activities and for accreditation actions to be taken by accrediting organizations with limited interruption to the expected timeline for completion. The introduction of virtual site visits to the accreditation process raises the question: Should these emergency practices become a permanent part of the accreditation process? Figure 4 summarizes respondents' thoughts regarding perpetuating the temporary modification. The majority of accrediting organizations (14) indicated that they would return to their pre-COVID-19 practices while four accrediting organizations stated that some changes would remain in place. Accrediting organizations provided the following examples of permanently changed practices: remote team preparation, flexibility in peer review participation in accreditation reviews, virtual decision-making meetings, certain trainings to remain virtual, and the ability to use technology when sharing documents for site visits and meetings.

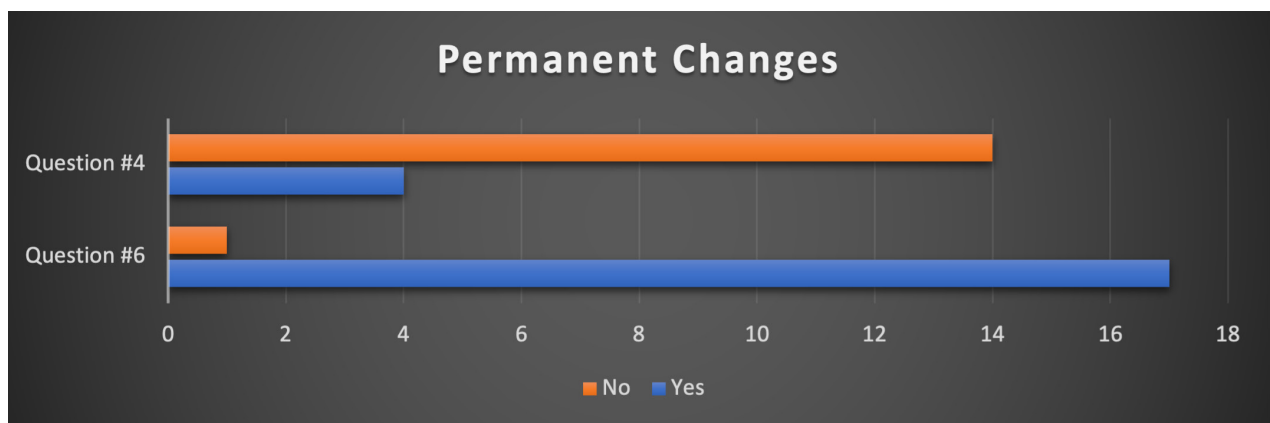


Figure 4 - Responses to Survey Question #4: Many accrediting organizations had to modify accreditation practices to accommodate COVID-19. Of those emergency modifications, has the decision been made to make any of these modifications permanent?

Responses to Survey Question #6: As a result of COVID-19 USDE provided waivers to its recognized accrediting organizations specific to operational requirements in the USDE recognition criteria. Did your accrediting organization use any of those waivers (e.g., distance education, remote site visits)?

Figure 4 also shows the responses to survey question #6, which reflect that 17 of the respondents used the waivers provided by the USDE. The 17 respondents were asked what plans were being made as the expiration to the USDE waivers approaches or has passed. The most common response indicated intent to implement and complete the required follow-up in-person site visit. One accrediting organization stated that they are still reviewing possible permanent modifications and another stated that they will be returning to all practices and policies that were in place prior to COVID-19.

In general, the results of the survey indicated that modifications to everyday practices were needed to facilitate the accreditation process and support HEI's. One accrediting organization stated, "Business continued without interruption. It was amazing." Other comments discussed efforts to save on travel and site-visit expenses, and the hope that virtual visits would become a permanent option. The USDE allowed for these types of temporary changes so that higher education and accreditation activities would not come to a halt during the global pandemic. It isn't clear whether USDE is considering making any of its temporary provisions permanent. Based on this survey, permanent adoption of some of the provisions would be welcomed by the accrediting organizations. It is important to note that accrediting organizations recognized only by CHEA were not subject to the same type of temporary provisions as those also recognized by USDE. This is because CHEA has never required the accrediting organizations it recognizes to host site visits, virtual or otherwise. As a result, accrediting organizations recognized only by CHEA were and continue to be unaffected by USDE's temporary provisions, and have had the flexibility needed to operate throughout the COVID-19 emergency.

As workplaces continue to evolve because of COVID-19, it is apparent that while many organizations will return to pre-COVID-19 protocols, others are making temporary changes permanent. The use of virtual technologies provided accrediting organizations the ability to complete site visits and hold meetings successfully; however, some accrediting organizations are ready to bring the human element back to the accreditation review while others feel that virtual technologies offered a new way of doing business that is of equal quality. Responses to the survey provided insight as to how different accrediting organizations used technology to conduct accreditation activities under unusual circumstances and whether, if provided the option, those changes will remain permanent. Additionally, survey respondents clearly indicated that the use of technology allowed their work to continue uninterrupted and that the quality of accreditation was retained.

Special thank you to the accrediting organizations that responded to the survey.

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## REFERENCES

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