



European Association for
Public Administration
Accreditation

Site Visit Manual

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Key guidelines for site visit team members

1. **Preserve confidence:** site visit team members shall make no disclosure about individual programme evaluations and recommendations resulting from the site visit team review process.
2. **Maintain the right spirit:** a site visit team should, before all else, be a collaborative group of peers helping programmes to improve, not an adversary. Interviews should not be interrogations.
3. **Find facts:** The team is responsible for presenting and interpreting the facts about the applicant programme to EAPAA Accreditation Committee (AC). Its responsibility is fact-finding and clarification, not to take a decision on accreditation/certification.
4. **Be a team:** the site visit team must work as one unit. Expressing differing views towards the programme is likely to cause confusion.
5. **Prepare well:** site visit team members should be familiar both with the standards, the procedure and the SER.

1. General Observations

1.1 The site visit team and its objectives

1.1.1 The site visit

The site visit is a critical part of the review and accreditation process. The site visit team has two responsibilities:

- a) It collects facts on behalf of the EAPAA Accreditation Committee.
- b) Through its report, it presents these facts and a reflection on them to EAPAA's Accreditation Committee.

The site visit team does not make a decision on accreditation/certification. It should refrain from making any recommendations or promises regarding the final decision.

During the site visit, administrators, faculty/staff and students at the host institution and members of the site visit team will be in intensive contact with one another. The site visit will be an occasion when the host institution will want to create the best possible impression on its visitors, while the visiting team will want to gain the most thorough possible appreciation of the programme under review.

1.1.2 Objectives of the site visit

The main objectives of the site visit are:

- to confirm that the programme has a clear mission and goals that it regularly assesses.
- to verify and clarify the description of the programme as presented in the Self-Evaluation Report (SER).
- to assess the programme against its own stated goals.
- to assess the programme against the EAPAA standards.
- to establish a basis for an evaluative report by the site visit team to the EAPAA Accreditation Committee.
- to provide an occasion for the exchange of information among colleagues and for learning about innovative developments responsive to common problems and opportunities in a common field.

1.2 Site visit team members

Site visitors are professional colleagues who are interested in the applicant programme's well-being and continued improvement. When this spirit prevails, sufficient information will be gathered during the visit to provide a sound basis for the team's evaluation. Great care should be taken by site visit team members to avoid statements of "how it should be done" or "how we do it at our institution". Such expressions can easily be interpreted in a fashion that detracts from the "objective" reviewer posture each site visitor should assume. An attitude for receptiveness to the applicant institution's philosophy and approaches not only makes the visit more productive but often yields dividends in "food for thought" as one returns home.

To facilitate the spirit of the site visit process, site visitors are encouraged to remember that:

- The site visit team as the name suggests, should be a team. It must work as a unit. The Chair is the official spokesperson for the team and must ensure that the evaluation is comprehensive and thorough. The complete co-operation of members in carrying out their respective assignments is essential.

- The highest form of professional confidence is entrusted to those with the responsibility for making a site visit. The opinions of site visitors about the programme being visited must be confined to the team and to members of the Accreditation Committee.
- Should problems be encountered that are not addressed in this manual, the EAPAA Secretary and members of the Accreditation Committee are available to answer questions.

In accordance with accreditation policy and procedures, no disclosure about individual applications and the evaluations and recommendations made to individual programmes resulting from the site visit team evaluation process will be made by any site visit team member, neither before nor after the decision by the Accreditation Committee.

1.3 Virtual site visits

Site visits traditionally involve travel. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has forced EAPAA to conduct virtual site visits. They may again prove necessary in years to come. Although such visits are broadly similar to traditional ones, some specific rules apply, which will be mentioned in this manual.

2. Pre-Visit Preparation

2.1 Responsibilities of site visit team members

The pre-visit preparation of every team member includes the following:

- Acquiring a knowledge of the standards and the process for a site visit. The relevant documents are available through the EAPAA website.
- Acquiring a good working knowledge of the applicant programme's Self-Evaluation Report (SER).
- Examine the materials uploaded by the programme.
- Defining specific questions for this programme.
- In case of a virtual site visit, arranging a quiet working space for the duration of the site visit, with a good connection. EAPAA will provide the platform.

Every member of the site visit team is expected to have read the applicant programme's SER well. These reports will have been prepared according to the EAPAA format. The SER is the result of much labour on the part of the host institution. When questions that are clearly answered in the report are asked during the site visit, confidence in the site visit process is greatly shaken. Thorough preparation will enable the team to focus quickly on the items that must be resolved during the course of the visit. But the team should also explore any other possible items missed in the Self-Evaluation Report. The Chair of the site visit team may ask each member to be particularly familiar with certain portions of the report and draft specific sections of the site visit team Report.

2.2 Responsibilities of the Host Institution

The host institution will have undertaken a great deal of preparatory work before the visit. The SER is the major result of this effort. There are some very important additional things that should be done, however, to ensure that the site visit goes well. The following is a suggested list:

- Every individual who will have some part in the site visit should be briefed beforehand about the procedure.
- It should be ensured the groups the site visit team will be meeting, such as students and faculty, will not be overly large (max. 10 persons).
- Everyone expected to participate in the site visit should be given sufficient advance notice so that he or she can be sure to be on hand as needed. The programme representative needs to submit a tentative but detailed schedule of persons to be interviewed, their names and the places to be visited. This schedule should be submitted to the secretariat no later than three weeks in advance of the visit, but preferably earlier.
- If additional materials were requested, these should be uploaded as soon as possible.
- It should be ensured that the room for the site visit team is adequate to receive groups of interviewees and that name plates for the site visit team and the interviewees (mentioning name and function) are available. Since the schedule is tight, there is little time for introductions.

The host programme, motivated by a sense of hospitality, may wish to organise some sort of social activity for the site visit team. However, other than sharing a lunch as mentioned below, social activities are considered inappropriate and should neither be offered nor asked for.

3. The Site Visit Schedule

It is impossible to define a site visit schedule that fits every situation. Presented here is a tentative model of how the site visit usually proceeds.

3.1 Length of the visit

The site visit will normally require 1.5 to 2 full working days. Team members should arrive in the late afternoon of the day preceding the start of the site visit. Days 1 and 2 are entirely devoted to site visit activities. In most cases, the site visit will be completed by the afternoon of Day 2.

On Day 2, the team will have an internal meeting to arrive at a consensus view and the draft conclusions of the site visit team report. A final meeting will be held with the appropriate officials, at which the chair gives a short concluding statement on the initial assessment, summarising the most important strengths and weaknesses of the programme in the eyes of the site visit team. However, it must be made clear that these impressions do not reflect a decision by the EAPAA Accreditation Committee. The programme officials are free to invite others to this final presentation.

There are, however, exceptions to this schedule:

- An extended visit may be required for multiple programmes or multiple campuses, or if the planned visit is thrown off schedule by some unforeseen event.
- In the case of a virtual site visit, it is recommended that the site visit team arrange an earlier meeting to agree on how to conduct the interviews. Since there is less opportunity for non-verbal cues, it is more important to plan the division of roles.

3.2 Model site visit schedule (on-site)

A possible schedule and its relationship to EAPAA Criteria is sketched below. This can be shortened or extended as appropriate, in consultation with the EAPAA secretariat.

Day before

Dinner (team members only)

Team members arrive and confer ahead of or during dinner about the site visit and the distribution of responsibilities. The chair agrees with team members who will take the lead in which session and who will take minutes.

Day 1

- 1) Meeting with the programme management
- 2) Meeting with the department and/or faculty management
- 3) Meeting with faculty/staff teaching common core courses
- 4) Lunch (preferably with faculty/staff and/or management)
- 5) Meeting with students
- 6) Meeting with graduates

7) Meeting with employers

Evening

Dinner and site visit team meeting (team members only)

Team members take stock of how the site visit is going and discuss what additional information they will need on the second day.

Day 2

Second meeting with the programme management

This meeting can be used to ask questions that have arisen the previous day. Additional data may be requested.

Visits as needed to the computer facilities, library and classrooms

Meeting with administrators as appropriate

Lunch (team members only) to arrive at a consensus about the site visit evaluation and to outline the draft site visit team Report to the Accreditation Committee.

Final presentation to programme representatives.

*Before leaving, the site visit team agree on the basic conclusions and recommendations. The chair determines which parts of the site visit report are to be drafted by which team members. **All team members are expected to take part in writing the report.** Minutes of the meeting should be written up and shared as soon as possible.*

The team can always request additional information during the site visit.

3.3 Model site visit schedule (virtual)

Although site visits are usually on-site, sometimes they need to be conducted virtually. In this case, the schedule must be somewhat different, because virtual meetings are more exhausting. If possible, there should be fewer interviews and longer breaks.

Beforehand

After the date has been set the site visit team confers, reviews the site visit schedule and assignments, requests any additional data or material needed during the site visit.

Day before

Meeting site visit team to discuss the last details.

Day 1

- 1) Meeting of the site visit team to prepare the site visit (including technical preparation)
- 2) Meeting with the Programme Management

- 3) Meeting with the Board
- 4) Meeting faculty staff teaching
- 5) Meeting with students

By the end of Day 1:

Site visit team members take stock of how the site visit is going and discuss what additional information they will need on the second day.

Day 2

- 1) Meeting site visit team
- 2) Meeting with graduates
- 3) Meeting with employers
- 4) Meeting with university or college administrators as appropriate
- 5) Meeting with the Programme Management

Discussion site visit team to arrive at consensus

Final presentation to programme representatives

By the end of day 2:

*The site visit team agree on the basic conclusions and recommendations. The chair determines which parts of the site visit report are to be drafted by which team members. **All team members are expected to take part in writing the report.** Minutes of the meeting should be written up and shared as soon as possible.*

4. Interviews

4.1 Interview techniques

Interviewing those who make the programme function (faculty/staff, students and administrators) is largely what the site visit is all about. Expert interviewers will find little new here; nevertheless, here are some reminders.

It is important that the site visit team respect what is unique about the programme being reviewed and the many ways in which a programme can achieve excellence. During the interviews, the nuances, unique features, and special ways of doing things that characterise the programme will have to be drawn out from the persons being interviewed. What is learnt will have to be weighed against standards that are themselves not rigidly defined. Accordingly, the interview process leaves room for prioritisation and improvisation.

There is no need for more formality than is functional for the purposes of getting the right information. However, what does happen is that interviewees elaborate extensively on certain points, ask questions of site visit team members, skirt around sensitive matters or by other means consume time better spent on other issues. In such cases, it can be necessary to intervene and more (re-)take control of the conversation. The willingness of EAPAA teams to engage with programmes less formally, on a peer-to-peer basis, depends on interviewees respecting the relationship. If they try to take advantage of it, then a more formal approach may be necessary.

Above all else, site visitors should be thoroughly prepared for every interview. Such preparation generally requires a focus on two fundamental questions: (1) on which aspects of the SER can the person being interviewed offer the best insights; and (2) what are the important, priority issues that must be covered in the limited time available?

In the case of a virtual site visit, some further issues should be kept in mind:

- Since it is harder to establish trust and a lively atmosphere through a screen, somewhat more elaborate introductions should be considered. EAPAA will plan in extra time to allow for this.
- More so than in a regular conversation, digital meetings require structure: a clear agenda, questions directed at specific persons rather than the entire group. Accordingly, this requires somewhat more planning.

4.2 Issues to be raised

The sections below provide suggestions about the kinds of issues that site visitors ought to raise in these interviews.

1. To what extent does the programme meet its own goals?
This requires a review of the programme's mission and goals, its self-assessment and its plan. The interviewing will tend to be informal and loosely structured to allow the site visit team members an opportunity to get a sense of the overall programme philosophy and how that philosophy is translated into programme policies and activities.
2. Is each standard sufficiently addressed?
This calls for a systematic assessment of the programme. Much of the relevant information will have been presented in the SER. The site visit team's first task will be to confirm and

clarify the facts, and to fill the gaps. During this phase, the interviews are likely to become somewhat structured, investigative and mechanical.

3. How could the programme be improved?

In the final part of its report, the site visit team will make suggestions for the further development of the programme under review. As the recommendations made in this section will go beyond minimal adherence to EAPAA standards, the tone and style of this section may be quite informal and open-ended.

These suggestions do not imply that the site visit team is restricted to formal or informal techniques at any specific point. Rather, the whole site visit experience will be most rewarding for everyone if procedures and styles are interwoven and interfaced. By the time the site visit is over, the team should have heard and gathered enough material in enough different forms to be able to draft the report fully.

The issues raised in the sections above have been put in the form of questions, but these should not be used as a checklist to be covered. Information relating to these issues should be elicited in a conversational way. The skilful site visitor will create the opportunity for the person being interviewed to tell the site visit team about the issues germane to the site visit, and will not behave as an interrogator or inspector.

Interviews with programme management

The dean and/or programme head could be asked to respond to issues and questions such as:

- What is the effectiveness of the internal administrative machinery established to carry out the programme?
- Long range planning, does it exist? How is it done?
- Which programme concentrations and specialisations are currently experiencing the largest enrolments?
- Does the programme attract grant money?
- Describe the programme's budgeting processes. What are the standards and processes relating to faculty/staff selection, development, promotion, tenure, salary determination, etc.?
- Is there an affirmative action programme or plan? Are actions being planned or taken to ensure diversity in faculty/staff including use of adjuncts and guest speakers?
- What comment can be offered on the faculty/staff interface with the public service community?
- Describe what you would regard to be the desirable mix of total responsibilities to be borne by the faculty/staff members. Specifically, what do you regard to be a desirable teaching load-why?
- What were the reasons, as you understand them, for any faculty/staff resignation that occurred last year - especially for a faculty/staff member you would have liked to see stay on?
- What have been the most significant developments in the programme in the past five years?
- If the programme were to have a 20 percent increment in the resources, how would you like to see increases spent?
- How do programme specialisations come to be created, expanded, contracted or terminated in your programme?
- How is the internship programme (if offered) managed including obtaining jobs in line with student interests, evaluation of students and assignment of credit?

- What efforts are underway to recruit students, particularly women and minorities? How successful have these efforts been? Is financial aid available for minority students?
- What changes in the programme's mission and character do you see in the next 5 to 10 years?

Again, many of the above questions should also be addressed to the faculty/staff members in the programme under review to understand comparative perceptions.

Interviews with faculty/staff members

Faculty/staff could be asked to address issues and respond to questions such as:

- What are the dean's or programme head's expectations for the programme, of faculty/staff and graduates?
- What is the faculty/staff role in the planning for programme development? Are the faculty/staff generally satisfied with their role?
- Were you or other faculty/staff colleagues involved in the preparation of the SER?
- On matters central to the programme, is the dean's or programme head's decision subject to substantial modification by any other dean or university official outside of the programme?
- What are the prevailing standards and procedures regarding faculty/staff selection, development, promotion, tenure, salary determination, etc.?
- Would you say that teaching loads are generally established with a view to the total responsibilities of the faculty/staff member?
- Have you or other faculty/staff colleagues with special research interests received reduced teaching loads to pursue these interests?
- Do you think the basic salary and fringe benefit structure are up to standards?
- What do you find exciting about serving on this faculty? Are there discouraging aspects?
- Do you regard your long term professional growth to be well served by remaining on this faculty?
- How would you characterise the "typical" student you encounter in relation to the goals of your programme?
- Do you find secretarial and support personnel resources to be generally adequate?
- What message would you like the team to convey to the dean, programme head, or president of your university?

Interviews with students and graduates

Students and graduates are an important source of information and issues. Questions of the following kind could be raised:

- What were your reasons for selecting this programme?
- Are you generally satisfied with your experience in the programme? Has it met expectations? Can you be specific about satisfying and disappointing aspects?
- How do you perceive the objectives of the programme? Is the curriculum consistent with these goals?
- Given your participation in the programme to date, do you think the programme will succeed in your case?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum?
- Which single educational experience in this programme have you most enjoyed?
- On balance, how would you characterise your "typical" professor?
- If faculty/staff or course evaluation forms are available to students, have the results of these questionnaires made any difference? If they don't exist, should they?
- Do students participate in the governance and development of the programme? formally? informally?

- What is your evaluation of the academic support services - the library, computer facilities, etc.?
- What is your evaluation of student services - internships, career counselling and placement, and the like?
- What has been the participation of students in the preparation of the SER?
- Do you think your education will effectively prepare (for alumni: has effectively prepared) you for entry into and/or advancement in the public service?
- (For alumni) In what ways are you as alumni involved with the programme? Are you contacted with any degree of regularity?
- What would you say to someone requesting your advice about entry into this programme?
- What is your message, to the president of your university, to the dean, the faculty/staff, student leaders, potential new students and the site visit team?

Interviews with employers

Questions of the following kind could be raised with employers:

- What is your experience with graduates from this programme?
- Does the programme prepare students well for work in your organisation?
- What are the strong and weak points of the programme? How does it compare to similar programmes elsewhere?
- Is there sufficient training of relevant skills?
- Do you have direct contacts with the programme? And what is your opinion about these contacts?

5. The site visit team report

5.1 Content of the site visit report

The final and crucial product of the site visit is the team's report to the EAPAA Accreditation Committee.

The following outline must be used as a template.

SECTION I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Summary of site visit activities
 - 1. Members of site visit team
 - 2. Dates of the site visit
 - 3. The site visit schedule (Should include the titles and names of all persons interviewed.)

SECTION II. Specific Topics Raised by the site visit team on the basis of the SER

Each item raised by the site visit team on the basis of the SER should be addressed in detail. The site visit team should report the facts relevant to the questions raised and provide an analysis of the programme's relative performance with respect to the Standard relevant to each item. This assessment should assess the strengths and weaknesses of the programme's performance with respect to the Standard in question. However, the site visit team should not reach final conclusions concerning conformity versus non-conformity with respect to the item and Standard in question. Final decisions on conformity versus non-conformity should be made by the Accreditation Committee based on clear assessments from the site visit team.

SECTION III. STANDARD-BY-STANDARD ASSESSMENT

In addition to addressing the items and standards raised in Section II, the site visit team should here present its evaluation of the programme's performance on each of the EAPAA Accreditation Criteria. Issues that are covered in section II can be treated briefly here.

As in Section II above, this assessment should discuss the relative performance of the programme with respect to each EAPAA standard, citing relative strengths and weaknesses. While evaluation and interpretation of the information will be necessary and important in this section (as in the previous sections above), the site visit team should not reach final conclusions concerning conformity versus non-conformity with respect to the standard in question. Final decisions on conformity versus non-conformity should be made by the Accreditation Committee based on clear assessment from the site visit team.

SECTION IV. GENERAL EVALUATION, COMMENDATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section the site visit team will evaluate the programme in general terms by summing up the important findings of the site visit. Therefore it should be no more than a few pages in length. It should (1) summarize strengths and weaknesses of the programme(s) and (2) suggest recommendations that the site visit team believes will strengthen the programme. Section V should therefore capture the consultative dimension of the site visit process and reflect the genuine concern each visitor should have for the welfare and development of the host institution and its programme(s). It is, however, clearly impossible for site visitors to become, in a couple of days, as knowledgeable as are their host about special local influences which must be taken into account when strategic decisions are at stake. It should be clear that these recommendations are the view of the site visit team members and do not reflect the formal EAPAA view. The wording must be

sensitive and tactful when specific solutions are advocated in those areas where improvement is deemed to be important.

5.2 Guidelines for writing the report

The authors must provide their own assessment of the facts on the basis of the SER and their interviews. In writing the report, the authors must bear in mind that the applicant programme administrators will be given the entire draft of the site visit team's report.

Please note that the site visit team is asked to make a presentation of the facts and assessments, but NOT to recommend either for or against awarding accreditation or certification to a programme. This is the exclusive responsibility of the Accreditation Committee. This procedure has been adopted to ensure that the standards are applied consistently to every programme.

The team will begin to assemble its impressions as early as the first evening. As suggested previously in the proposed site visit schedule, the team should arrange to meet alone before the site visit. All members of the team should be involved in the development of the report, even though ways of allocating drafting responsibilities will vary. The final wording of the report should be reviewed by all team members before it is forwarded.

In the event that there is major disagreement within the team with respect to a particular standard, then a statement on the differences of opinion should be communicated to the Accreditation Committee, but not included in the site visit report itself.

5.3 Deadlines

The deadline and distribution of the site visit team report are as follows:

1. **Draft report**

A draft of the entire report should be completed by the team and sent by the Chair **within 6 weeks after the end of the site visit**, unless agreed otherwise. A copy of the report should be sent to the secretariat, who will forward it to the programme liaison. **All site visit team members are expected to contribute substantially to writing the report.**

2. **Programme response to the draft report**

The programme liaison must file a response to the draft report with the secretariat within two weeks of receipt of the draft report. The secretariat distributes this response to the members of the site visit team.

3. **Final draft report**

Assuming no major revisions are necessary, the final version of the site visit team Report should be completed and sent to the Chair of the Accreditation Committee (along with a copy of the programme response) through the EAPAA secretariat within two weeks of receipt of the applicant programme's response. In the event of substantial revisions, the site visit team chairperson must advise the Accreditation Committee on the amount of extra time that will be needed.

6. Reimbursement

EAPAA reimburses travel costs, including the costs of transportation to and from the airport in both countries and transportation to the site visit location, as well as hotel accommodation, meals during the site visit and (when applicable) visa application fee for the members of the site visit team.

Booking flights and hotel accommodation

EAPAA takes care of booking flights and hotel accommodation for the members of the site visit team.

Members of the site visit team may book their flights themselves. The costs (normal fare economy class) will be refunded immediately.

Reimbursement of the costs incurred

The costs incurred will be reimbursed within 5 days upon receipt of the account number and receipts from the team member.

Note: as befits a peer review-based accreditation system, EAPAA does not pay a per diem for the members of the site visit team.