

EVALUATION

The Dutch System of External Quality Assessment: Description and Experiences

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ABSTRACT **Context:** Generally speaking, quality assurance in Dutch higher education consists of four parts: a self-evaluation, written by the faculty, a review committee, consisting of experts, the site visit, and a public report of the assessment outcomes.

Task of the Review Committee: The organization, in which all universities are united, appoints a review committee for each educational program. Most educational programs are taught at different universities. Consequently, the review committee visits several universities. The task of the review committee is: to assess the overall quality of these educational programs in The Netherlands; and to assess the quality of each school separately.

Method: The members of the review committee start their activities by formulating the evaluation criteria (standards) for the content of an educational program and for the educational process. This ends with a paper that will be used as a reference for the assessment. Then the review committee studies the self-evaluation reports. The faculties write these reports along established guidelines. In cases where the self-evaluation is not completely clear, or not sufficient, the committee formulates questions and asks for additional information. Then the committee visits the faculties. These visits take usually two days each. During these visits, the committee gets information from the dean of the faculty, the program committee, teachers, students, and from other employees of the faculty. In addition, the members of the committee inspect the facilities of the faculty, e.g. the library.

Result: Directly after the visit, the chair of the committee gives, orally, a first impression of the findings. After visiting all faculties, the committee starts their deliberations, which result in a report of the assessment of the overall quality of the educational programs. The committee also assesses the quality of each faculty separately, often ending with recommendations.

Conclusion: The Dutch system of quality assurance in higher education is much copied by other countries. The essence is the self-evaluation on one hand, and the site visit on the

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other. Committees try to act as consultants, and not as executioners. Therefore, the way the members of the committee play their role is very important.

KEYWORDS *Evaluation, quality assurance, accreditation, visiting committee.*

Introduction

There is no doubt that nowadays quality is in the spotlight. Although quality is a concept that can be applied to all sectors of the society, there is an extensive public debate on the quality of education. There are several reasons for this increased attention.

Many countries are grappling with similar issues in higher education. The main issues are mass higher education and its many consequences, such as the cost, who should pay, appropriate types of education, appropriate types of institution, how to evaluate the education, and who should evaluate it. Central in these considerations is the assurance of the quality of institutional activities (Woodhouse, 1996). In addition, the relation between higher education and society has changed in the last decennia. The societal interest of higher education has been emphasized. The relationship between higher education and the labor market has come under discussion (Vroeijenstijn, 1995).

Governments have assigned themselves a strong steering role in these developments. The dominating idea was that it was possible to develop higher education by detailed regulations. Since the 1980s governments abandoned the idea that it was possible to “shape society”, and a new philosophy with regard to higher education arose. In many European countries, governments are stepping back and promise more autonomy. However, in exchange, the governments are requiring quality assurance. Quality (see Table 1 for definitions) became increasingly important for the higher education institutions, because the question is whether it is still possible to deliver the same quality within the given boundary conditions.

The Dutch System of External Quality Assurance (EQA)

The Netherlands has a binary system of higher education. There are 13 research universities (RUs) and 57 Universities of Professional Education (UPEs), formerly called polytechnics. The RUs are united in the Association of Cooperating Universities in de Netherlands, abbreviated in Dutch as VSNU, and the UPEs in the HBO-council (HBO-raad). Each year about 180,000 students start their training in the RUs; this figure is higher for the UPEs: 250,000 students.

Table 1. On the problem of definition

Much has been written on the meaning of quality in higher education, and many definitions suggested. Harvey and Green (1993) tried to classify the definitions into five discrete but interrelated ways of thinking about quality:

- Quality as exceptional: the exceptional notion of quality takes as axiomatic that quality is something special; e.g. high class, high standards or above a certain level.
- Quality as perfection or consistency: this notion focuses on process and sets specifications that it aims to meet perfectly.
- Quality as fitness for purpose: this approach suggests that quality only has meaning in relation to the purpose of the product of service.
- Quality as value for money: this notion has to do with efficiency. More, or better, for less money.
- Quality as transformation: this view of quality is rooted in the notion of “qualitative change”, a fundamental change of the form, e.g. ice is transformed into water and eventually in steam.

Harvey and Green conclude that it is not possible to talk about quality as a unitary concept; quality must be defined in terms of a range of qualities. At best perhaps, it can be defined as clearly as possible the criteria that each stakeholder uses when judging quality and for these competing views to be taken into account when assessments of quality are undertaken. This conclusion is consistent with Woodhouse (1996). He argues that the most commonly accepted definition is “fitness to purpose”. This allows institutions to define their purpose in their mission and objectives. Thus, quality is demonstrated by achieving these. This definition allows variability in institutions, rather than forcing them to be clones of one another.

Following the publication of the policy paper entitled *Higher education: autonomy and quality* (Ministerie van Onderwijs en Wetenschappen, 1985), the relationship between the government and the higher education institutes in The Netherlands were restructured. In exchange for a greater degree of financial and managerial autonomy, the higher education institutions would prove to society that they deliver quality education (Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994).

Thus, the institutions were held responsible for the quality of education. Therefore, EQA became an imperative in higher education policy. In 1990, the higher education institutes concurrently agreed upon a system of EQA. In this, independent external experts are appointed as members of visiting committees to evaluate the quality of the programs and to make recommendations for improvement. The aim of the EQA program is to gain insight into the quality of the education and to contribute to the assurance and improvement of the quality of individual programs. In this manner, the higher education institutes demonstrate its accountability concerning the quality of the education. In addition, the EQA program contributes to augmenting the social recognition of the programs, the qualifications obtained, and to the public information facilities (HBO-raad, 2000).

Together with France and Great Britain, The Netherlands was among the first European countries to institute a formal performance model system in the mid-1980s. The approach combined self-evaluation with peer review by visiting expert committees. The focus was the program, rather than the institution. The state strongly advocated performance indicators, but universities resisted these. More autonomy would be granted, but in exchange for cooperation in the development of a comprehensive system designed to regularly assess the performance of university performance. The state would not completely devolve its authority, but would be selective about the arenas of its involvement. As well, the coordination relationship was open to other stakeholders such as employers and local authorities. According to Maassen (1998), the system incorporated a drift towards market-oriented criteria. Universities were to develop strategic, performance-based self-knowledge—*institutional profiles*—and were encouraged to adopt managerial modes of behavior and business principles.

Originally, the state intended the Inspectorate of Higher Education to administer the performance model. However, through a compromise deal in 1986, the higher education institutes were able to involve their own representative organizations in the process, and the Inspectorate was bypassed. In practice, two separate systems were developed: one for the RUs coordinated by the VSNU, the other for the UPEs by the HBO-council. Both emphasized the dual performance goals of quality improvement and accountability. The pilot project began in 1988 and the full system became operational in 1989.

Description of the Dutch Model

In essence, the Dutch external quality system has four core elements:

- the self-evaluation;
- the visiting committee;
- the site visit; and
- the follow-up process.

All these elements are equally important and will be described below. The assessments take place per assessment domain. Sometimes a domain consists of one specific program, such as the “psychology” domain, in which all the psychology programs are visited. Other times programs with associated content-related characteristics are grouped in a single domain (HBO-raad, 2000).

The Self-evaluation. The link between the internal and the external quality assessment is the self-evaluation of the faculty of which the program is assessed. The self-evaluation is carried out before the site visit by the committee. It has a threefold purpose (Vroeijenstijn, 1995):

- to stimulate internal quality management;
- to prepare internally for the site visit; and
- to provide basis information for the visiting committee.

The result of the self-evaluation should be laid down in a report according to the guidelines formulated by the VSNU and the HBO-council.

The self-evaluation report should treat the following subjects:

- Description of the specific organizational structure and the position of the faculty/discipline within the structure of the institution.
- A description of the size and characteristics of the student intake. Success rates and dropout rates.
- A description of the program: the objectives, the topics, and so on.
- A description of the educational process: teaching methods, assessment procedures, and so on.
- A description of the program organization and program management: educational policy, link between the policy with the institutional policy, teaching load, internal quality management, and so on.
- The graduates: the level, the jobs, and the unemployment rate (see Vroeijenstijn, 1995, for details).

Thus, the self-evaluation consists for a large part of descriptions. However, pure descriptions are not enough. The committee expects also a thorough analysis of the problems the faculty experiences with the subjects mentioned above, and intended means of dealing with the shortcomings found must be indicated.

The self-evaluation report should be sent to the visiting committee two months before the actual site visit takes place.

The Visiting Committee. A visiting committee has five to seven members: a chairman, working in one of the faculties to be visited, two experts in the field of the subject area, one expert in the field from the employment area taking up graduates, one expert in the field of education/learning processes, a student, and sometimes an expert from abroad. The secretariat of the committee is taken care of by the VSNU or the HBO-raad.

The use of a team of respected peers to review all programs not only increases reliability, but also likely improves the validity of each review, and enhances the seriousness with which it is treated by each visited faculty. The context and visibility of the teams creates a node of expertise and an informal network of individuals within each discipline who are knowledgeable and concerned about the improvement of academic programs in the field. These networks may persist and serve as an informal mechanism for academic improvement beyond the period of the review. The single published report helps to emphasize collective accountability and responsibility, rather than

institutional competition; because of the collegial selection of faculty reviewers, and the continuity of the review process, the comments on the state of the field are likely to be viewed as both authoritative and generalizable by individuals in the relevant discipline and can thereby serve as catalysts for communication and social connection within and among the faculties of different universities (Dill, 1995).

The task of the committee is to form an opinion about the program in terms of content of education, educational process, organization and management of the program, and graduates. In order to prevent a too global judgment, the committee should pay attention to each of the following topics shown in Table 2.

In contrast to other countries like the UK, France, and Denmark, the VSNU and the HBO-council have chosen to involve the faculty deans in the nomination of the members of the visiting committees. The formal appointment of the committee remains the responsibility of the VSNU or the HBO-raad.

Before the start of the site visit(s), the preparation phase, the general frame of reference is made specific for the domain. The visiting committee establishes these in the course of several meetings before the visits take place. The members of the committee prepare themselves by studying the self-evaluation reports and other documents sent.

The Site Visit. The afternoon before the visit, the committee studies supplemental documentation on location that has been accumulated as requested by the committee. What is concerned are theses, exams, literature and plans for quality assurance, etc. The committee prepares the interviews. During the visit, which takes one day (UPEs) or two days (RUs), the committee confers with the various groups, such as representatives of the field for which the program educates the students, teachers, graduates, students, the program management and the governing body. In addition, the committee examines the building and other relevant facilities. On occasion, the committee may look in on presentations or classes. At the end of the site visit, the committee reports its initial findings.

The Follow-up Process. According to Vroeijenstijn (1995):

The conflict between “improvement” and “accountability” arises particularly when the committee writes down its findings. Viewed in the light of “improvement”, it would be important to keep the report confidential. From several sides people stress that a public report endangers the function “quality improvement” because faculties will adopt evasive behavior. They are less willing for honest self-analysis and an open discussion with the peers. They are against exposing weaknesses, because they might be punished for that.

Table 2. Topics to be assessed by the visiting committee (cf. Vroeijenstijn, 1994)

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1. Study program: aims, characteristics, content
 - Aims and objectives
 - Program characteristics
 - Level of examinations and methods of student assessment
 - Students' skills
 - Level of final thesis/final projects
 2. The student and his/her education
 - Student numbers: enrolment and total numbers
 - Dropouts and completion rates
 - Average duration of study
 - Study load
 - Organization of the program
 - Student counseling
 - Facilities and infrastructure
 3. The graduates
 - Level of the graduates' knowledge and skills
 - Labor market perspectives
 4. Academic staff
 - Staffing
 - Qualification of academic staff
 - Students/staff ratio
 - Graduate/staff ratio
 - Personnel management
 5. Internationalization
 - Participation in ERASMUS, LEONARDO DA VINCI, etc.
 - International contacts
 6. Internal quality assurance
 - Self-assessment
 - What was done with the outcomes of the previous assessment?
 - Evaluation process
 - Connections with alumni
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In the light of “accountability”, there will be pressure to publish as much as possible of the data, findings, and conclusions. The outside world is interested in having as much information as possible about the faculty and the curriculum, and also about such matters as staff numbers, time spent on teaching and research and cost per student. (p. 59)

After weighing the pros and the cons against each other, Vroeijenstijn concludes that the advantages of a public report are greater.

In The Netherlands, the report is public. After the visits, the secretary of the committee writes the draft for the final report. The committee members give their views on the written text. The final report consists of specific parts and a general part. Specific parts are those that concern individual programs. The specific parts follow the guidelines of the VSNU or the HBO-council regarding the evaluation framework. An answer is given to every evaluation question from the frame. In the closing paragraph, an analysis is given as an insight into the causes and effects of the problems in provision that have been encountered. Based on this analysis, the committee formulates its recommendations for the improvement of the quality for the program concerned. In the general part, the quality is described and recommendations are made on the national level.

The higher education institutions are obliged to respond to the Inspectorate of Higher Education after the official publication of the final report. The institutions need to indicate in their response which resolutions they have made and which activities they are going to undertake in connection with the recommendations made in the report. The Inspectorate assesses each report of the visiting committees in the form of a meta-evaluation. The Inspectorate checks whether its methodological demands have been met, and whether the reports sufficiently meet the function of both accountability and improvement (HBO-raad, 2000).

The Dutch System as a Shining Example

The Dutch system of external quality assessment has received attention by many people or institutions. According to Atkinson-Grosjean and Grosjean (2000):

Given the evidence to date, there seems to be no “ideal” model or mix. However, if one country stands out, it is the Netherlands. Of those national systems, the Dutch seem to have mastered the positive aspects of performance models while avoiding many of the more negative consequences. This is the reason, no doubt, that many countries in Continental Europe follow a “softer” Dutch-style model, involving qualitative measures and far less prominence for performance indicators than in the UK and US. States, territories, and provinces that have yet to implement these models, might want to consider the contrasting understandings of “performance” in the European and Anglo-Saxon systems, and review relative strengths and weaknesses, before committing resources.

This Dutch system correctly claims to be the pacesetters in peer-review-oriented assessment procedures and applauds the subtle wisdom and elegant compromise of their program in balancing the creative tension between the academy and the government, between educational improvement and public accountability (Palmer, 1996).

Vroeijenstijn (1994) enumerates the essential parts of the system:

- The external quality assessment is owned by the universities.
- EQA in the first place aims at quality improvement, other aims subordinated to the main purpose.
- Education and research are assessed separately.
- There is no direct link between outcomes of assessment and funding.
- The system is not performance-indicator-oriented.
- The system is based on self-assessment and peer review.
- The faculties are involved in the nomination of the members of the visiting committees.
- EQA is discipline-oriented.
- EQA operates nation wide: all higher education institutions with a program in the relevant area of knowledge are visited by the same committee.
- It covers all programs.

It seems that these aspects of the Dutch model of external quality assessment are responsible for the favorable position it has among other models of quality assurance.

Conclusions

While adapted from the North American model, the Dutch system differs because the institutions collectively own it. Largely because of this, over time, the emphasis has shifted from the accountability end of the spectrum towards the improvement end. As well, evaluation results do not feed into the policy or funding process; there are no political consequences. It is felt that direct links would lead to strategic behavior and tend to undermine the improvement process (Maassen, 1998). This creates something of a dilemma since real incentives are lacking, yet if incentives were introduced, power games would prevail. According to Maassen, the Ministry's response has been to abstain from short-term interventions, but with the threat of medium- to long-term consequences in the absence of results. Thus, the Inspectorate plays a meta-evaluative, monitoring role. So far, the trust invested in institutions appears not to have been misplaced. Faculties and departments seem to take their responsibilities under the system seriously.

However, in the absence of incentives, what does "taking responsibilities seriously" mean? Has the low-key approach to performance produced any real change? A study of Dutch higher education by Frederiks *et al.* (1994) concluded that the quality of teaching is receiving considerably more attention than before the reforms. Many programs and faculties now have special committees or specially appointed staff members for the quality management of education, and the topic has certainly gained an important place on the agenda of decision makers. As well, in contrast to the former singular focus on pedagogy, the input, and output characteristics of education—informing

potential students and investigating the labor market prospects for graduates—are now receiving attention. Frederiks *et al.* suggest that a “quality culture” is emerging in Dutch higher education.

In terms of responses to self-evaluations and the recommendations of visiting peer review committees, Frederiks *et al.* find that while measures *are* taken to address outstanding issues, the relation between taking measures and observing improvement is obscure. There is no evidence that the large amount of resources invested leads immediately to an equally large improvement in the quality of education.

This conclusion is not unexpected or inexplicable. We do not need to conclude that it is better to stop the time and money consuming activity of EQA, because the effects of “quality culture” cannot and should not be expected to be immediate and large. The mere existence of the system does effect the way of thinking in the university. Maybe the most important effect of EQA can be described as “promoting the quality debate” (Vroeijenstijn, 1995). Nevertheless, Frederiks *et al.* (1994) find a surprisingly high level of satisfaction with the Dutch performance model. Surprising for two reasons: the traditional reluctance of autonomous organizations to submit to external scrutiny, and the heavy administrative burden involved in constructing an adequate self-evaluation (Atkinson-Grosjean & Grosjean, 2000).

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