External quality assurance
Evaluation of PhD programmes
in The Netherlands

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Rome
December 4th, 2014
External quality assurance in Higher Education
Quality assurance (QA) in higher education differs within Europe

- Countries have their own culture, history, political setting, et cetera
- European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) are leading, but there is no one size that fits all
- Increasing convergence: external quality assurance should foster internal quality culture
- Differences provide learning opportunities!
- My opinion: As degrees of freedom increase, as in PhD programmes relatively to 1\textsuperscript{st} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} cycle higher education, more differences in QA approaches have to be allowed for

ESG: http://www.enqa.eu/index.php/home/esg/
ESG revision: http://revisionesg.wordpress.com
NVAO has quite a broad scope of work

- Recognition of new higher education institutions
- Institutional audits
- (Initial) accreditation
  - (New) programmes that want to offer a recognised degree
  - All bachelor and master’s programmes, research master’s programmes and associate degrees
- Publication of decisions (and officially recognised degrees)
- Internationalisation
- Expertise and input for (inter)national policy making
- NL and Flanders, approximately: 50 fte staff; 3,000 programmes; 20 universities; 60 UAS; 80 private HEI

UAS: University of Applied Sciences
HEI: Higher Education Institute
Private HEI largely diversified: 3 large, rest are relatively small and/or ‘niche players’
External QA aims for balancing **ENHANCEMENT** and accountability (1)

- Stimulate quality culture → institutional audit
- Commit professionals / Increase academic ownership → programme assessment
  - Focus on content; not on procedures
  - Assess achieved learning outcomes; not performance indicators
- Reward earned trust → limited programme assessment
  - Two types of programmes assessments
- Stimulate HE to aim above threshold → accredit as satisfactory, good, excellent
- In case of ‘unsatisfactory’ → recovery period
External QA aims for balancing enhancement and ACCOUNTABILITY (2)

- Recognition and accreditation
  - Providers need to be recognised as HE institutions
  - Programmes need to be accredited
- (Initial) accreditation decision establishes:
  - Level (bachelor/master, associate degree), discipline and orientation (professional/academic)
  - Quality: unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent
- National register of recognised HE programmes
- Reduce the administrative burden: limited amount of assessment standards and paper ware (‘red tape’)

Institutional audit: ‘In control’ of quality?

1. What is the vision of the institution regarding the quality of the education it provides?
2. How does the institution intend to realise this vision?
3. How does the institution measure the degree to which this vision is realised?
4. How is the institution working towards effecting improvements?
5. Who is responsible for what?

- Standard 5: Organisation and decision-making structure
- Standard 1 and 2: Vision and policy
- Standard 4: Improvement policy
- Standard 3: Results
- Effective implementation (by progr. assessment)
Institutional audit: composition audit panel

• At least 4 members, including 1 student
• The panel commands administrative (Board), educational and audit expertise, is acquainted with developments in the higher education sector at home and abroad, and is authoritative
• One of the members with Board expertise will act as chair
• The panel is independent (its members have had no ties with the institution over at least the past 5 years)
• Not part of panel: NVAO process co-ordinator and secretary (also independent of the institution)
Institutional audit: process

- Institutional profile: results of previous accreditation
- Critical reflection by HEI (max. 50 pages + appendices)
- Site visit: 1\textsuperscript{st}: general exploration and 2\textsuperscript{nd} : audit trails, emerging from general exploration
- Audit trails: vertical (top-down and vice versa) and/or horizontal (consistency within institution)
- Panel report including summary and recommendations
- After signing by chair and secretary submitted to NVAO for decision-making
- Standards 1 and 4 have to be met for positive decision
- NVAO can deviate from panel judgement; thoroughly motivated! (Few times, based on consistency considerations)
- Internal (hearing) and external (Council of State) appeals possible
Programme assessment can be limited or comprehensive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Limited programme assessment</th>
<th>Comprehensive programme assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of</td>
<td>Detailed assessment of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Intended learning outcomes</td>
<td>• content,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• content and staff</td>
<td>• policy and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Achieved learning outcomes</td>
<td>• procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 standards</td>
<td>16 standards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Themes

1. Intended learning outcomes
2. Programme and staff quality
3. Achieved learning outcomes &
   Learning assessment (two standards)

1. Intended learning outcomes
2. Programme
3. Staff
4. Support and facilities
5. Quality assurance system
6. Achieved learning outcomes &
   Learning assessment

Conclusion: unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent quality
Programme assessment

• **Generic quality**
The quality that in all reasonableness could be expected of a bachelor’s or master’s programme within higher education, and this from an international perspective.

• **Unsatisfactory**
The programme does not provide generic quality.

• **Satisfactory**
The programme provides generic quality.

• **Good**
The programme is of notably higher quality than generic quality.

• **Excellent**
The programme is of a quality very much above generic quality and fulfils an exemplary role for other relevant programmes.
Expert panel composition

- At least four members, one of whom is a student;
  - at least two authoritative subject-matter experts
    - At least one with teaching experience at relevant level and orientation;
  - aware of latest international developments in the discipline
  - expertise in the professional field (where applicable)
  - educational expertise
  - assessment or audit expertise;
HEI are responsible for assessment, evaluation agencies can support

- HEI are free to choose an agency, or none at all
- About five evaluation agencies offer their services:
  - Composing evaluation panels (which NVAO has to approve)
  - Panel support in the evaluation process
  - Delivering the panel secretary and drafting the report (panel remains responsible)
- NVAO decides on accreditation, based upon panel report
- NVAO can deviate from panel assessment if thoroughly motivated or after additional evaluation; is exceptional
Topics in renewing the system: earned trust; risk-based; institutional accreditation?

- Everyone agrees on reducing administrative burden where possible
- HEI ask for a more trust based system, universities advocate institutional accreditation
- Universities of applied sciences and private HEI see more in adapting the current system to earned trust
- Students insist on keeping external programme assessment, have HEI ‘deserved’ enough trust?
- Government looks for a combination of these positions. Experiments with institutional accreditation seem likely
Evaluation of PhD programmes
As in HE, quality assurance in PhD domain differs within Europe

• The ARDE project of European University Association provides an overview (www.eua.be/arde)
• Differences coincide with whether emphasis is put on research or on education
• Shift towards more educational approach: PhD as 3rd cycle in higher education
• Main areas of (QA-)attention: supervision of PhD candidates, effectiveness of PhD-’routes’, responsibilities, use of indicators, acquired competencies after completion

ARDE final report:
www.eua.be/Libraries/Publications_homepage_list/EUA_ARDE_Publication.sflb.ashx
Usual approach in NL for PhD candidates is the ‘research practitioners’ concept

- PhD candidates are employed by universities as research assistant in the research unit of their supervising professor (NL: ‘promotor’)
- Formal doctoral programmes/courses and PhD students are relatively new in NL:
  - Main PhD-route: research assistant, obtaining PhD in 4-5 years; increasingly educated in doctoral schools
  - External PhD candidates: employed outside universities, working on their PhD takes much longer
  - PhD-students from NL and increasingly from abroad: scholarships; currently under experimentation
Evaluation of PhD-tracks (‘programmes’) focusses on evaluation of research

- Assessment of research by peers from the Royal Academy
- Doctoral schools (NL: research schools) are evaluated and recognised by the Royal Academy
- Concept of peer review, as in HE-accreditation
- NVAO has no formal role in PhD-tracks, PhD-education or doctoral schools
- Doctorate boards at Universities regulate and oversee the PhD-degree awarding power of individual professors
- PhD candidates have at least two supervisors (NL: promotor and co-promotor(s))

(1) Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences: [www.knaw.nl/en](http://www.knaw.nl/en)
Research is evaluated on research quality, relevance to society and viability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Research quality</th>
<th>Relevance to society</th>
<th>Viability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>World leading/excellent</td>
<td>The research unit has been shown to be one of the few most influential research groups in the world in its particular field.</td>
<td>The research unit makes an outstanding contribution to society.</td>
<td>The research unit is excellently equipped for the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Very good</td>
<td>The research unit conducts very good, internationally recognised research.</td>
<td>The research unit makes a very good contribution to society.</td>
<td>The research unit is very well equipped for the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>The research unit conducts good research.</td>
<td>The research unit makes a good contribution to society.</td>
<td>The research unit makes responsible strategic decisions and is therefore well equipped for the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Unsatisfactory</td>
<td>The research unit does not achieve satisfactory results in its field.</td>
<td>The research unit does not make a satisfactory contribution to society.</td>
<td>The research unit is not adequately equipped for the future.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

- Criteria on scientific productivity have been abandoned


In brief: [www.vsnu.nl/research-qualityassurance-en.html](www.vsnu.nl/research-qualityassurance-en.html) (both 🇳🇱)
PhD programmes and research integrity are also evaluated (1)

Regarding programmes the assessment committee considers:

- Supervision and instruction of PhD candidates.
- Institutional context of the PhD programmes
- Selection and admission procedures
- Programme content and structure
- Supervision and the effectiveness of supervision plans
- Quality assurance
- Guidance of PhD candidates to the labour market
- Time to complete, success rate, exit numbers
- Career prospects.
PhD programmes and research integrity are also evaluated (2)

Regarding research integrity the assessment committee considers:

- The research unit’s policy on research integrity and the way in which violations of such integrity are prevented
- How the unit deals with research data, data management and integrity
- The assessment committee bases its assessment on how the research unit itself describes its internal research culture. The Royal Society has drafted a standard questionnaire on this matter
The (international) shift towards doctoral education poses a ‘Dutch dilemma’

- More uniform ‘school based’ approach of PhD programmes (doctoral education) or research practitioner approach (doctoral research)
- More education driven quality assurance (comparable to 1st and 2nd cycle higher education) or more research driven approach
- In general: enhancement culture is to be preferred over compliance culture. Especially with more degrees of freedom and encountering the unexpected as is the case for PhD candidates, working at the frontiers of knowledge
- The NL-combination of research evaluation and PhD programme evaluation, without ‘QA-stacking’ seems quite optimal in terms of academic & professional responsibility, QA-burden and achieved quality