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**„Identifying Barriers in Promoting the European Standards and Guidelines
for Quality Assurance at Institutional Level“**

IBAR

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Project “Identifying barriers in promoting European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance at institutional level” (IBAR)

National study: WP5 Quality Assurance System

The Netherlands

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1 Preliminary remarks

The cases for the IBAR project in the Netherlands concern four higher education institutions, two large and two small ones, two universities and two universities of applied sciences.

University		Other higher education institution (universities of applied science - UAS)		
Small	University specialised	A	UASB specialised	
	Large	University comprehensive	C	UAS D

Note1: 'students' are in 1st and 2nd cycle programmes (Ph.D. candidates are either junior staff members or externals who are not counted at all).

2 National level

2.1 Is there a national quality assurance policy in place?

2.1.1 Does the policy at national level prescribe the creation of internal quality assurance system? Is the QA policy a separate policy?

2.1.1.1 Legal requirements

Quality assurance has been an element of the national Dutch higher education policies since the first half of the 1980s, codified after about a decade into the 'WHW' Law on higher education and research of 1992 (with subsequent changes). The law's preamble starts with the statement that for the strengthening of quality (plus innovative capacity and social connectivity) institutional autonomy in the higher education system needs to be strengthened. Quality obviously then takes pride of place in the official policy rhetoric and more than that, for state-funded¹ higher education institutions it is the first among eight necessary conditions to conform to the quality assurance requirements in the law in order to actually receive state funding (WHW art. 1.9. sub 3).

Article 1.18 sub 1 of the WHW makes the governing board of state-funded as well as private higher education institutions responsible for regular assessment of the quality of the institution's activities; this must include the institution's study programmes (WHW art. 1.18, sub 3.). The assessment must include external 'independent experts' whose report must be public, and should be organised in cooperation with other higher education institutions if possible (WHW art. 1.18, sub 1.). Students' judgements on the quality of education are a

¹In the terms of Dutch law, it is more meaningful to distinguish state-funded from privately-funded higher education institutions, rather than try to put them in categories of 'public' or 'private', as elements of public and private law apply to both categories. In general there is more public law applying to the state-funded ones, but those include some well-known church-related universities (protestant Vrije University Amsterdam, catholic universities Radboud in Nijmegen and the one in Tilburg); moreover, all non-university higher education institutions (universities of applied sciences or UAS's) have private statutes yet are mostly state-funded.

necessary part of the quality assessment (WHW art. 1.18, sub 1.). Experts' judgements of the quality of study programmes must be based (at least in part) on the accreditation framework (WHW art. 1.18, sub 3.).

Each higher education institution must make a strategic plan every six years, in which quality enhancement of the study programmes is the one subject mentioned explicitly (WHW 2.2). In its annual report accounting for the spending of public funding, the higher education institution must spell out its planned policy regarding next year's activities (i.e. an operational plan), again with explicit emphasis given in the law only to the results of quality assessment, and the further data it has on quality of study programmes (WHW art. 2.9. sub 2). In the spirit of institutional autonomy, the law does not prescribe *how* the institution must fulfil these duties.

2.1.1.2 Accreditation

Chapter 5a of the WHW regulates the national policy regarding accreditation of study programmes in all higher education institutions, with or without public funding. Accreditation is the form of external quality assessment which is pointed to in all previous articles of the WHW. The agency for accreditation is the NVAO, the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation, which is regulated partly in the WHW but more in detail in a treaty between the Netherlands and Flanders. We do not need to go into NVAO's organisation for the purpose of this project.

Accreditation has been introduced in the Netherlands in 2003, as a consequence of the Dutch policy to make higher education more compatible with the developments in the Bologna Process. In a change to the WHW in 2002, accreditation of the new types of study programmes was introduced at the same time as the bachelor-master degree structure. The degree structure has been further changed by adding a short, first-cycle degree called 'associated degree' (Ad) as in the USA.

After the first round of programme accreditation for all bachelor's and master's programmes in state-funded and other higher education institutions in 2003-2010, it was decided to make the next round (from 2011 onwards) more efficient and more focused on the content, level and process of education. Both aims, starting from the efficiency gain, should be reached by giving higher education institutions the option to take an institutional audit, in which all institution-wide quality assurance aspects could be evaluated once and for all, so that in the programme evaluations, more attention can be given to content, level and process of education, without the 'bureaucracy'. This means that the external quality assurance procedures in Dutch higher education currently encompass:

- Optional institutional audit
- External evaluation of all study programmes
 - o in a full version or
 - o in a 'restricted' version if the institution successfully has completed an institutional audit;

- all newly-developed study programmes must obtain a quality license ('test of new study programme, abbreviated in Dutch to TNO) before they may award associate, bachelor or master degrees.

The NVAO develops 'frameworks' for all of these procedures (WHW art 5a.2, sub 1; art. 5a.2a), in cooperation with stakeholders (WHW art. 5a.2a, sub. 2) and in discussion with its European counterparts (WHW art. 5a.2 sub 5). The minister of education approves the developed frameworks within 17 weeks unless they are in conflict with the law or with the general interest; the parliament may discuss the minister's intent to decide (WHW, art. 5a.2a, sub. 3).

Responsibility for asking accreditation lies with the governing organ of the higher education institution (WHW art. 5a.9, sub 1). The last of six criteria that the NVAO must at least consider in its accreditation decisions is the 'design and organisation of internal quality assurance, aimed at systematic improvement of the study programme' (WHW art. 5a.8, sub 2, f—our translation).

Through the other criteria that the NVAO must consider, the law defines the minimum of areas that higher education institutions must consider in their internal quality assurance, because they need to inform the NVAO about the state of play in these areas (WHW art. 5a.8, sub 2, a-e):

- intended final level of the study programme, with a view to international expectations
- organisation and content of the study programme
- final level reached by students [not in a TNO, of course] and rigidity/solidity of the assessment and examination of students
- quality and quantity of personnel, HRM policy.
- facilities for study, including counselling and facilities for disabled students.

If one of the criteria is judged unsatisfactory by the external reviewers, compensation may be found in other criteria so that accreditation is not immediately in danger. However, this does not apply to assessment and examinations: this must be judged to be at least satisfactory (novella of the WHW in 2010).

For an institutional audit of quality assurance, the NVAO checks the following elements in relation to the quality of an institution's study programmes (WHW art. 5a.13b):

- vision on quality of education
- design and effectiveness of internal quality assurance,
- policy regarding personnel and facilities
- facilities for handicapped students

If the institutional audit is passed successfully, the programme evaluations can drop the quality assurance requirement.

Accreditation is a requirement for the right to award degrees, for students to have a right to the national study grants & loan system, and for funding of the study programme (in state-funded institutions only).

Evaluation panels appointed by the NVAO (for the TNO and for the institutional audits) as well as other external evaluation committees that play a role in official accreditation processes must contain a student (WHW art. 5a.2, sub 2). The student's membership is not qualified, implying that the student-member has equal rights to other evaluation committee members.

2.1.1.3 Monitoring and review of programmes and quality assurance

The upshot of the accreditation frameworks is that all curricula are expected to be reviewed with external elements in the reviews at least once every 6 years.

2.1.1.4 Quality assessment of research

Although outside of our focus: there is a national quality assessment scheme for (fundamental) research in universities (not in UAS's as they are only engaged in applied research). This is governed by the 'Cooperative Evaluation Protocol' (abbreviated to SEP in Dutch), which demands external evaluation by an international panel every 6 years, and internal self-evaluation in the middle between two external evaluations.

There is also a quality framework for applied research for UAS's using external evaluations and an institutional audit by the VKO (once in six years).

2.1.2 What is it based upon (learning outcomes, qualification of staff, equipment)?

Internal quality assurance in higher education institutions must fulfil at least the NVAO requirements, which were treated in the section on the national legal framework (§ 2.1.1.2).

The NVAO's frameworks and further operation has been reviewed for compatibility with the ESG in 2007. Its positive outcome is reflected in the NVAO being part of the EQAR and being a full member of ENQA.

Learning outcomes in the 'translation' into the final level reached by students and solidity of the assessment is the one criterion which must be judged positively (on other criteria some compensation is possible), showing too that this is supposed to be the main basis of the accreditation framework.

2.1.3 Is there an explicit reference to ESG?

Not in the WHW.

In the Framework for accreditation, the NVAO mentions the ESG only in the paragraph justifying the structure of the Dutch accreditation system :

NVAO has established that the requirements with regard to institutional quality assurance assessment, set by the Minister of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) in his memorandum *Focus op quality* [Focus on Quality], are in excellent alignment with the ESG. NVAO has translated and rearranged the ESG in order to shift the focus from quality assurance to quality enhancement.

2.1.4 To what degree it is accessible publicly? In what major EU languages is it available?

The law is available only in Dutch. All governmental laws, regulations and documents are accessible and searchable through the website www.overheid.nl (which has a limited section/set of links in English).

The NVAO's frameworks, operationalizing the legal requirements, are available through the NVAO's website www.nvao.net, with web pages and documents also in English.

2.2 How does the policy involve the organization of the quality assurance system? If yes, please describe. Who is the person responsible?

The Minister of Education is responsible. The law, WHW, calls into being the accreditation organisation and gives it a number of tasks and competences. The Minister appoints the governors of the NVAO, but they are not accountable to the Minister for the content of their decisions (WHW 5a.3, sub 3).

2.2.1 Which information systems are available for internal quality assurance?

Not applicable at national level.

2.3 How does the policy involve the responsibilities of departments, faculties and other organizational units?

Not applicable at national level.

2.4 How does the policy address the involvement of students? If not, why?

Students' judgements on the quality of education are a necessary part of the quality assessment (WHW art. 1.18, sub 1.).

2.4.1 Is there a requirement for students to be involved in the preparation of self-evaluation reports? If yes, in what status (observer, expert, member of a governing body?)

Not applicable at national level.

2.4.2 Is there a requirement for students to be involved in decision-making as an outcome of evaluation? Who selects and appoints the representatives of students?

The WHW obliges the Minister to have regular consultation with students' organisations on issues of general interest to students; those student representatives get some financial support from the Minister (WHW art. 3.3). The appointment of governors of the NVAO is among the issues to be discussed (WHW art. 5a.3, sub 2).

The accreditation frameworks have to be discussed by the NVAO with student organisations (WHW art. 5a.2a, sub 2) (and with labour unions of staff).

2.5 How does the policy involve specification of the relationship between teaching and research?

2.5.1 To what extent is research considered as a quality criterion of the institution and its structural units/employees/students?

Research is legally part of the mission of universities, as applied research is legally part of the mission of UAS's, but they are not part of the definition of quality of education, except through the connection of how students encounter research experience. This element however is not part of the WHW, but is in the NVAO frameworks. In the extended programme accreditation, standard 2 regarding the curriculum states in general that: 'The orientation of the curriculum assures the development of skills in the field of scientific research and/or the professional practice'. For the institutional audit, standard 2 contains some elements that must be part of the institution's quality policy; one is 'embedding of research in the education provided'.

2.5.2 Are there specific incentives (e.g. financial) to promote the importance of teaching/research quality of staff and structural units?

National policy leaves staff development mostly to the institutions themselves, but there is a national agenda for promotion of qualifications of teaching/research staff in the UAS's, which provides funds and arrangements to stimulate that all UAS teachers obtain a master's degree (in the past many came from the 'world of work' because of their practice-oriented knowledge) and for a larger share to obtain a Ph.D. degree.

2.6 What are the ways of policy implementation, monitoring and revision? Is the implementation mainly top-down or bottom-up? Is it monitored continuously or sporadically (e.g. as part of an external evaluation)?

National monitoring is through accreditation of study programmes, which takes place every six years. In between, the Inspectorate of Education, the 'eyes and ears' of the Minister of Education, has the right to react to signals it gets about lack of quality. If the Inspectors' investigations lead to serious worries, the NVAO may initiate a process to withdraw a

programme's accreditation anytime (not waiting for the six years until the next scheduled re-accreditation).

2.7 How does the policy involve the statement regarding the collaboration with the secondary education sector? Are there any activities directed to schools and pupils and aimed to enhance quality of secondary education? Please give examples of activities.

The links between secondary and tertiary education run through definition of end terms for secondary education and access rights (and their exceptional restriction) into higher education. The general access routes are depicted in the scheme below (Figure 2 -1). Successful completion of secondary education is tested through a national examination. The diploma of six-year secondary education (VWO) gives students the right to enrol in universities or UAS's. The diploma of five-year secondary education gives students the right to enrol in UAS's. Restrictions of access are allowed only in special cases such as when the capacity of the study programme is limited in relation to demand (e.g. in fast-growing areas;

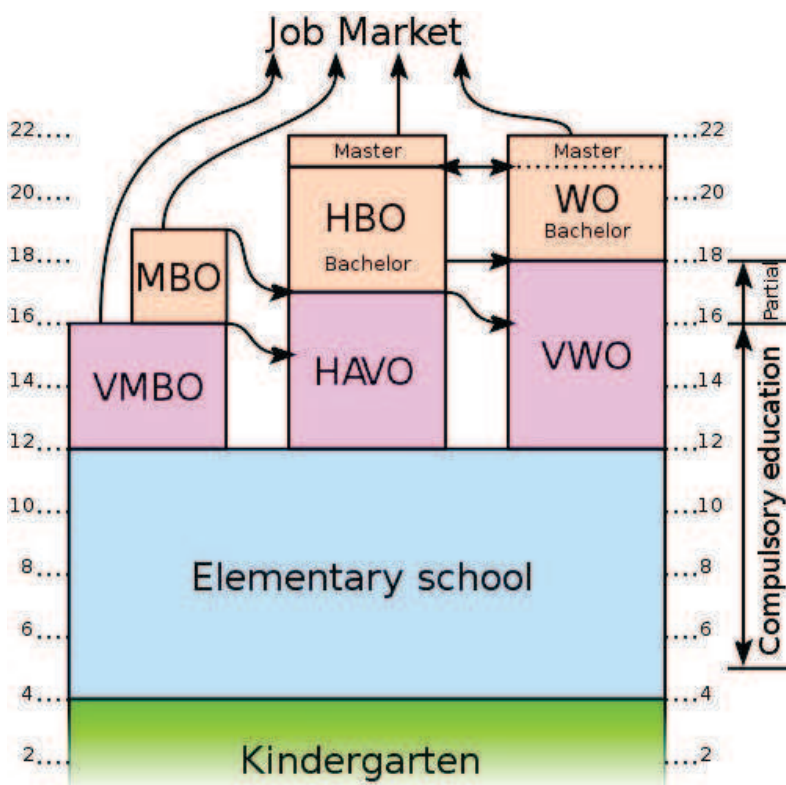


FIGURE 2-1 MAIN STREAM SCHEDULE OF DUTCH EDUCATION

the capacity must be raised annually, though), or in relation to the labour market (e.g. in medicine, dentistry, veterinary medicine; all are university programmes). Special selection procedures may apply in areas that have no direct equivalents in secondary education, e.g. in performing arts (in UAS's).

Changes in secondary education's end terms have been made nationally in recent decades. In those processes, higher education organisations have been involved at the national level.

References

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