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

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

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1. Introduction

The Standard 1.3 of the ESG states **'**Students should be assessed using published criteria, regulations and procedures which are applied consistently.'

In looking at the implementation of Standard 1.3, institutional policies and practices related to student assessment have been analysed. To this purpose, the report's ultimate aim is to highlight on the one hand barriers and on the other hand examples of good practice observed in the implementation of the standard in the Dutch higher education institutions.

The higher education system in the Netherlands consists of two sectors, the university sector (WO) and the sector of higher professional education (HBO, in Dutch *hogescholen*). Both the universities and the *hogescholen* have their own focus on education, as defined in the Higher Education and Research Act (WHW) of 1993: "The universities prepare students for independent scientific work in an academic or professional setting; *hogescholen* offer theoretical instruction and aim to develop the skills required for application in a particular profession. Practical experience is an important part of the training".

The university sector comprises 13 universities. They prepare students for independent scientific work in an academic or professional setting. There are nine universities which offer programmes in a wide range of disciplines and subject areas, three provide mainly technical and engineering programmes and one is specialised in life science. In addition the Open University provides programmes both on university and HBO degree-level.

The HBO sector consists of 48 *hogescholen,* internationally termed *'Universities of Applied Sciences'*. They provide programmes in the following sectors: economics, health, social-agogic areas, agriculture, education, engineering and arts. These programmes normally have a standard length of four years and students receive after completion the Bachelor degree. Programmes can be on a full-time and part-time basis.

The HBO-sector is the largest sector with over 380,000 students enrolled either full-time or part-time (respectively 80% and 20% of enrolments) in 2010. The total enrolment in universities is about 220,000 students.

In the following we present the findings of the four case studies (two universities A and C, and two HBO institutions B and D) on student assessment policies and practices. We conclude by identifying the key barriers to ESG implementation and good practices. The main characteristics of Dutch cases were presented in WP 5. Within the institutions we have studied different faculties/schools – we chose faculties/schools focusing on 'hard' sciences, such as chemistry and on the 'soft' sciences, such as business and management.

2. Policy context

The rules regarding education and examination processes in Dutch higher education institutions are prescribed by the Higher Education Act (Wet Hoger Onderwijs- WHW). In the institutions they are transferred into institutional regulation within each faculty or school in the Education and Examination Regulation (OER) which slightly differs per institution and per faculty.

The recent changes in the Higher Education Act (September 2010) were focused on student assessment. The governance of student assessment is in the hands of the university management, Examination Boards, Examination Appeals Boards, faculty management and examination committees.

The Higher Education Act defines the Examining Board as being responsible for the quality of examinations. It determines regulations regarding the grading, gives permission to change programs of individual students (e.g. Exemption), applies sanctions in case of fraud, appoints examiners, hands out diplomas of a program (WHW art. 7.12). The Board is appointed by the dean (WHW art. 7.12 a) and its role has been more emphasized as a serious player in examination and quality assurance policies of a faculty.

It consists of the academics from a particular program in each faculty/school. Depending on the organization of the faculty/school and the amount of programs they have, each program can have an Examination Board, or all one cycle study programs may have one Examination Board. The rules regulating the Examination Board are set out in Rules and Guidelines for the Examination Board as foreseen in art. 7.12b of the WHW. It meets every month and information about it is available on the websites and in the Student Statute, as well as the Education and Examination Regulation (OER).

At the top of the higher education institution, there is an Examination Appeals Board (College van Beroep voor de Examens) which can discuss the decisions made by Examination Boards. They also can decide about the number of credits accumulated with regard to the performance-based student grant.

The Law foresees (WHW art 7.3, paragraph 2j) that each year students have two opportunities to take a written or oral exam associated within a specific unit of study. Practical training can be completed at least once per year. There is at least one opportunity to take the exam at the end of the period in which the applicable unit of study had been taught.

If the student fails to achieve a mark of 6 or higher after two assessments of a unit of study, and the student wishes another opportunity to sit this exam, an application must be made to the Examination Board. This application must be accompanied by a plan of action, which is drawn up by the student in consultation with the study adviser. The Examination Board decides whether or not to grant the application. This rule is not applied in all studied institutions. For example, in institution A students have no

restriction on the number times for retaking of exams. For each course they have three possibilities to take the exam in a year.

The students register for exams via the Student portal. The exam timetable provides information about the registration closing date for written exams and tests.

Moreover, the new Accreditation Framework emphasizes the quality of the examinations as a separate part within the accreditation visitations. In case the examination quality is evaluated unsatisfactorily, it will no longer be compensated by better scores from other areas. The Dutch and Flemish Accreditation Organization prescribes a triangle related to measuring learning outcomes (aligning the competences with the assessment and the content taught). The Qualification Framework of the EHEA is manifested in the Dutch higher education system (NVAO 2011)

3. Methodology

The Dutch four case studies were carried out in October-November to answer the questions of the WP 7. We studied the national legal documents (WHW 2010), the NVAO documents regarding the new Accreditation Framework, as well as the National Student Charter. Further, we studied a range of institutional documents and reports, including strategic plans, institutional policies for quality assurance and assessment, faculty and school regulations on quality assurance, institutional student charters, faculty and school assessment policies and the rules and regulations of Examination Boards. Various literature was collected, such as guidelines for teachers, study guides for students, information booklets for teachers, information of the assessment services of the quality and assessment administrative units of the institutions. Finally, a range of semi-structured interviews were carried out ranging from 30 to 70 minutes. We interviewed 33 individuals at four institutions in October-November 2011, including: 4 managers responsible for quality, 6 policy advisors responsible for quality assurance at the central and faculty/school levels, 1 teacher training officer, 1 policy advisor for education and student affairs, 2 human resources officers, 3 education directors, 1 officer of the exam committee, 8 teachers and 5 students. The interviews were recorded, summarized and analyzed. Further, the document content analysis was carried out.

4. Changes in student assessment: policies and practices

1. a) **What is the institutional policy on student assessment?**

All four institutions have institutional policy on student assessment mainly following the requirements of the Higher Education Act (WHW). As prescribed by the law, the faculties/schools have their Study guides, Study and Examination Regulations (OER) and the Regulations of the Examinations. These regulations state the procedures,

rights and duties of teachers and the institution with regard to education and examination of students. The Study and Examination regulations are made up of two parts. One part is generic for the whole institution while the second is more tailored towards the specific needs and requirements of programmes in different faculties/schools. Both parts are revised on a yearly basis and approved by the Faculty Council together with the Faculty Management.

The institutions in general take student assessment seriously and all of them have the following codes of practice in place:

- An assessment should examine skills and knowledge of a student, in order to determine whether the competences are obtained or learning outcomes are reached.
- Assessments can take place in different forms, i.e.: written or oral exam, a piece of work, a report, a personal academic record exam, a computer exam or a presentation.
- The study programme offers a student at least two times in a year, the option to participate in an exam.
- Students have to register for all assessments via an electronic system.
- An electronic system is used to submit the result of student assessment.
- Every faculty/school has an assessment policy. The assessment policy is in line with the OERs.
- Students receive adequate feedback for each assessment

An important body for checking the assessment procedures is the Examination Board in all four institutions as prescribed by law. Due to the changes in the law, the role of this Board has been enhanced. Until recently, the Examining Boards of the studied institutions focused on the quality of individual students' programmes, including granting exemptions, and checking whether students had completed each course successfully to justify granting them a degree. It was the role of the Examining Boards also to analyse whether the grading of theses was appropriate and to tackle the questions of fraud. The Examination Board is appointed by the dean and has to report yearly to the institutional management team and to the faculty/school management. As noted in the OERs of the studied institutions, every study program must have a link to the Examination Board. Depending on the faculty, there maybe more than one Examination Board. The practices vary per faculty/school, however, the overal regulatory framework is the same. Besides the Examination Board, there is a central Examination Appeals Board in each institution. It accepts student appeals regarding the passing and admission to examinations.

With the changes of the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW) of September 2010, the Examining Boards are in the process of strengthening the role of assurer of quality assessment, both via interim course exams and the assessment of internship and theses. Each examiner is made responsible for ensuring that an assessment of a course is valid, reliable and transparent. To achieve this, examination policies within each faculty/school have been revised (R&R) by the Examination Boards and respective

faculty/school management. Moreover, the University Student Charter and the Study Guide outline all the details of the examinations and testing.

The new requirements for assessments are also laid out in the revised curriculum for professional development courses for the lecturers. The new lecturers are required to take the University Teaching Qualification within the three years of their contract in Dutch universities. Making valid, reliable and transparent assessments is usually part of the curriculum to obtain the UTQ.

Besides the above common features, each institution has its own peculiarities when it comes to the institutional policies regarding student assessment.

The Institution A seems to have a strong quality culture and takes care of student evaluations and examinations. In their institutional policy they emphasize the new role of Examination Boards and some of them are unique to this institution. The regulation states that the Bards are to visit chair groups on a regular basis to verify the quality of assessment of courses provided by the groups. Additional visits take place when required, for example, when this is indicated by the results of course evaluations.

The Institution B has different locations of its campuses, thus it struggles to have a unified institutional policy on student assessment. However, it provides the key regulation (OER), study guides and the student charter with detailed descriptions of their student assessment policies and procedures as required by the law and link these procedures closely with the learning outcomes. In addition, the institution is actively taking care of impartiality in student assessment and has had a policy that the examiner cannot be the teacher of the course. In addition, they have stimulated teacher groups which focus on the improvement on the assessment procedures.

The Institution C due to its size had different approaches towards student assessment in different faculties and is struggling to harmonize the procedures across the board with the new enhanced role of the Examination Boards and more focus on explicit information about examinations for students via the Study Guides and Student Charter. Moreover, this institution's regulation requires all the faculties to prepare the test manuals for teachers with the obligatory quality requirements, part of which are also noted in the student charter and in the study guide:

1. The tests must be constructed to meet the requirements set in terms of validity, reliability, transparency, practicability and comparability.
2. The test must be representative of all subjects that the teacher considers important in the course material. Subject matter that has only been treated orally during a lecture must not be tested, as attendance to lectures is not compulsory.
3. Students must receive written information for each exam subject on:

- the learning objectives (in terms of both content and required proficiency level);
- the quantity of material to be studied;
- the type of test insofar as not already laid down in the OER;
- the weighting of the various components of the test (e.g., if the mark is determined by both a test and a paper);
- the method for determining the norm and – if possible – the norm itself;
- the planned exam and re-sit date or the deadline for handing in assignments/papers;
- the consequences for the final mark if assignments are not handed in on time;
- the opportunities for viewing the corrected exam;
- the responsible teacher.

4. The first page of a test must contain at least the following information:
   - the available time;
   - the number of pages and questions;
   - instructions for filling in the exam (way in which answers must be given).

5. The Faculty Board or Examination Board makes arrangements for the exams known to teachers and students
   - the participation of students (proof of registration, etc.);
   - the role of examiners;
   - maintaining order during the exam;
   - academic misconduct.

As noted by the interviewees in the Institution C, the rules about examinations trickle down to the departments and program directors or departmental mangers responsible for education. They say that the rules are 'discussed and prescribed by the management team of a faculty'. Not much difference is observedin this regard between the hard and soft sciences faculties. Teachers in the faculties have the examination guidelines in the form of the booklet and the reflection on the examination forms is taking place within the groups of teachers within some programs.

The institution D follows three distinct criteria when assuring the quality of assessment. Assessments shall be valid, reliable and transparent. To achieve this goal the institution offers special trainings for its examiners to get acquainted with these principles. The central management determines the standards on student assessment, in cooperation with the education and support service, in its student charter. Next to the institutional guidelines, the single schools might have additional assessment rules, tailor-made to their profile and anticipated learning outcomes. In addition to the standards mentioned earlier

which apply to all institutions, the institution D refers to the following standards to be implemented at the school level:

- Every study programme has certain key competences to be obtained during the course of study. They are operationalized in form of a competence card. This competence card is an essential factor when determining the assessment procedures. The procedure shall be designed in such a way, that it contributes to the competences strived for in the competence card.
- On basis of assessment policy of each school an assessment plan is developed (containing all components needed to design an assessment). This document explicitly states what, how, where and why is tested.
- Students will get assessed for at least 70% based on individual performance also in cases of group work.

b) How is the relevant information communicated to students?

Information regarding student assessment is made available to students via the internet website, information brochures and other printed matter. It is foreseen in the Higher Education Act that once students are enlisted in the course, they have to receive a copy of the Student Charter. As observed in the four case studies, the Charter is available on the internet. The Charter is renewed on a yearly basis. It consists of two parts – the first part comprises general information about studies at the particular institutions, regulations and codes of conduct (including study assessment) and the other- specific information related to a program. In addition, students receive yearly Study Guides, which are also available via student portal on the institution's website. This guide contains information about the study programs, the courses and their descriptions per program. Further, each faculty/school adds information about their IT services, student advisors and internationalization. The descriptions of courses contain official title of the course and the course code, a description of the aim of the courses, the content, the number of credits and the form of the study and the examination. While the content is the responsibility of the faculty/school, the production and distribution of the guide is the responsibility of the central communication office of the institution. These documents are available digitally and in the printed format and are renewed on a yearly basis. In addition interviewed students and teachers indicated that assessment procedures for courses are frequently introduced at the beginning of a course by the teacher in an oral format

The four institutions use Blackboard as the internet portal for student information as well as registration for courses and exams. Students enlist for exams as well as get informed about the grades received via Blackboard. Although in some cases the information about assessment is still available in the paper format. In addition the grades of the theses are communicated orally after the theses colloquium and on paper afterwards. However, Blackboard plays an important role in most cases informing students about their assessment results. University C however also uses an internal student portal for course registration purposes and for announcing the student grades.

Although it is not surprising to see a rather elaborate information system of student assessment due to the concrete prescriptions of the law (WHW, art. 7.59), the interviewed students have noted that it is really working. The students know what to expect from the exams and according to what criteria their theses will be marked.

Although most of the formats of information are similar among the four studied institutions (e.g. institution C has used Blackboard already for 10 years), some institutions are still in transition from paper format to the electronic format. For example, in the case B, students are informed about their results on the assessments in two ways. Firstly, within three weeks after an assessment they receive their results on a form. This form specifies how the student performed on different parts of the exam and whether they passed the exam. In addition, a meeting is organized where the results and the exam are discussed. The total result can be consulted in the student registration system; the results on parts of exams is only available in the paper forms. This system is currently changing towards more electronic handling of the examination results.

2. How are student assessment procedures made appropriate for their purpose?

The institutions have specific regulations for testing which clearly specify what the tests should include and how they should be created. The key criteria for testing procedures is validity, transparency, reliability, and comparability. The concern about the validity of the tests is common among all studied institutions partially due to the requirements of the new Accreditation Framework. A feedback between student and teacher is foreseen after the examination in the student assessment regulations of the studied institutions.

Although the assessments leading to credits are mostly summative and the judgement of a summative assessment can be in form of a mark (1-10), passed/not passed or insufficient/sufficient/good/excellent, various other assessment procedures are encountered both in policies and in practice in the studied institutions (although not all of them give study points). The assessment varies in different schools/faculties and programmes due to the disciplinary differences, but also differs per type of institution (in the Universities of Applied Sciences for example more emphasis is given to the reports of the employers on placements and skill assessment). The common feature of the difference between the faculties/schools within the institutions is that social sciences have already been using a variety of assessment forms, while the 'hard' sciences faculties are only now putting new policies in place to introduce more interim progress testing. It is advised to use test matrix for both formative and summative testing in each course.

In the institution C, a large university, the testing regulation of the faculties (to a varied extent) specify that it is advisable to include both formative and summative testing. Formative assessment according to the guidelines is crucial for directing the learning process of a student since in their view continuous feedback helps to improve student performance. This form of assessment is important to note the development of a student rather than the level of knowledge.

The following requirements are laid out for the tests:
1. The tests must be constructed to meet the requirements set in terms of validity, reliability, transparency, practicability and comparability.
2. The test must be representative of all subjects that the lecturer considers important in the course material. Subject matter that has only been treated orally during a lecture must not be tested, as attendance to lectures is not compulsory.
3. Skills are usually tested in the form of a product: a thesis, a completed assignment, a presentation or a (work placement) report.
4. In each BA course there should be at least 25% of study components should have assessment in the form of a paper (up to five pages) which count towards the final assessments of those components.

The interviews have shown that the practices of student assessment vary per faculty and per course. Traditionally assessment has been the realm of a teacher, although within the framework of general rules about student assessment, that is, requirements for what tests should check and when information about tests should be made available to the students. Currently, the sciences faculty has developed a policy with more interim testing especially in the cases where students do not show up in classes or do not participate in classes. In the faculty of 'soft' sciences, one can see a development towards more multiple choice exams due to the increase in student numbers. It is becoming common practice to check the validity of the multiple choice exams with the quality assurance and assessment unit at the university as well as to discuss the tests among the group of teachers within a particular program. This is in part due to the increased emphasis on examinations in the national Accreditation Framework as well as increased pressure to improve graduation rates of the students (time to degree).

A similar varied picture was identified with the Institution D, where practices of assessment varied per course and per school. The social sciences school uses summative assessments to check whether the student possess the anticipated competences (knowledge, attitude and skills). The examiners are advised to keep multiple aspects into account when making the assessment i.e.: skills, knowledge application, behaviour, evaluation. Diagnostic and formative assessments are meant to show the student his competence-level and to adjust the educational activities to the level of the students. Formative/diagnostic assessments do not lead to study points, yet they are linked to wider assessments. To illustrate, one interviewed teacher referred to his course, in which students have to carry out four assignments within 8 study weeks. A student needs to pass all four to be admitted to the exam. In other courses students can obtain bonus points (0.5) for an exam, if the assignments were successfully completed. In one of the language courses, students have to do two assignments and a presentation next to a final written exam. For these formative assessments students get a pass or fail. In case of an underperformance students get 0.5 points subtracted from their grade of the final exam. In the hard sciences school the plan is to adapt the assessment procedures in the future since summative assessment has been dominant. The aim is to introduce exams with a diagnostic character which measure the interim progress of students. Diagnostic assessments are perceived as essential when monitoring whether the student obtains the

right practical skills. Ideally this would take place on a weekly basis and maybe via the internet. Currently study advisors mainly follow the student's in-between progress.

The University of Applied Sciences, Institution B, seems to have an elaborate list of types assessments in their guidelines compared to other studied institutions. The assessments vary per period of study and the course and may take a large variety of forms.The following assessment types were identified in this institution:

- Conceptual assessment: most often written assessments to check knowledge of theories, concepts and models; this knowledge may also be assessed in an oral examination.
- Skills assessments: depending on the required skills the method of assessment differs; it may be an oral assessment or a written one. However, a clear link with the professional field is made. In a number of cases students sit in small groups in class and are assigned a certain role to show that they have mastered the skill. In other cases students have to show that they have mastered the skill in a real life situation.
- Experience assessments: during each term students participate in real life projects and the assessment is based on those experiences. Students are given a case that forms the basis of a variety of questions asked during the assessment.
- Reflection assessments: each term in the first and second year students have to reflect on what they have learnt by writing a reflective report, which is assessed by a career counselor.
- Integrated assessments: students are placed to do practical training twice per study program, a short one during one term and a longer one which lasts two terms. The reports they write are the basis of the oral assessment of the practical training. The examiners assess whether the student is competent on the basis of a number of predetermined criteria that cover knowledge as well as skills and attitude. In addition, the assessment form filled in by the placement organization is used as an input for the assessment. The thesis project is the ultimate test, where students have to show that they have acquired the necessary competences. The mark given for the thesis is a combination of the report itself, the oral defense and the student's ability to work independently.

It can also be observed, that in the University of Applied sciences, there is more guidance for lecturers from the administration side regarding the assessment forms and procedures compared to the studied universities. This points to more professionalization and institutionalization of the oversight regarding testing in the institutions B and D, and more relaxed approach in institutions A and C. For example, in the institution D, the education and support office advises the departments in their choice of assessment procedures while in the institution C, it is the colleagues or the lecturer groups within the programme who advise on the assessment forms.

Finally, only in one institution we could identify the practices of pre-testing. In institution B students can prepare themselves for an assessment by participating in the project as well as through coaching and feedback sessions. Diagnostic tests are part and parcel of the preparation. The individual assessments are written, oral or portfolio.

3. **How are student assessment procedures designed to measure the intended learning outcomes and other programme objectives?**

In all institutions the policy states that each course has its own specified learning outcomes and the testing has to be adequately related to the outcomes. The assessment strategies of the institutions explain how and when a learning outcome is assessed, who is involved in assessing students and how the final mark is determined.

The institutions follow a scheme (a triangle) developed by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), which links assessment to competences and learning:
  - educational profile/competences (determined by job qualifications, knowledge and skills, didactic concepts),
  - learning in programs,
  - programme assessment.

This link is facilitated by the use of test matrix. Applying the matrix is now prescribed by the new accreditation framework and is used already in the studied institutions (although the spread of this practice differs per faculty/school and the type of institution). For example, in the institution A, there are a number of ways to assess the degree to which students achieve the intended learning outcomes. These include assignments, essays, multiple choice questions and open questions. The university provides guidelines to its lecturers on how to describe learning outcomes of their courses. Lecturers as prescribed by institutional policy in the institution A have to formulate five to eight intended learning outcomes for all programs. The interviewed staff in universities B and D are more conscious of the usage of this triangle although the practices of its usage vary within the respective institutions.

This leads to a situation where the institutions are still in transition towards this new scheme of designing student assessment which is manifested in the attempts to use one central template for all faculties. As observed by a teacher in the University A *"There is a form newly introduced where lectures have to describe for each course specifically the learning objectives and in what way these are assessed."* Within the faculties/schools, the implementation of the scheme is mainly the responsibility of teachers together with study directors. Learning outcomes and the forms of assessment first are discussed in the program committee, then in the exam committee. In the view of one faculty manager who is responsible for education in the institution C, it is good to have student assessment procedures designed to measure the learning outcomes since then it is easier to organize the courses in manageable units, achieve unity of the courses and improve the communication with the students. Despite such positive views of some quality officers and institutional managers, the practices of using the scheme vary in different faculties as witnessed by lecturers and policy officers.

Another example from the big University of Applied Sciences (Institution D) also illustrates the complexity of implementation of the triangle. The quality policy officer in

institution D stated that although this scheme should be followed for all courses offered at institution D, there are some schools which apply it more effectively than others. In his view, this scheme should be communicated also to the students. Students can use informal and formal channels to show a missing connection between the three elements of the educational set up - formally via the examination commission or informally during feedback moments. It is experienced that students indicate a missing connection when they are dissatisfied, rather than indicating improvements.

The triangle system is more institutionalized in the two cases of the Universities of Applied Sciences. This could be partially explained due to their specific mission in the higher education system – these institutions are focused on teaching directly linked to the application of knowledge in the professional world and their students have specific profile geared towards labour market. For example, the Institution D has introduced the system of competence cards for students in order to trace the core competencies acquired by students by the end of their studies. Competence cards identify core competences a student should obtain after finishing the studies. These core competences are operationalized in different performance indicators which are linked to specific evaluation criteria/skills (a further development of the performance indicators). For example, one core competence is the skill to conduct marketing research. This competence is operationalized through the following performance indicators: a student is able to design a marketing plan, collect and analyse data. These competences shall be mirrored back in the teaching content and the assessment method. To illustrate, for some competences practical skills need to be tested, whereas for others knowledge and theory are tested. The students confirmed that they know how the wider course objective and examinations link to the required competences.

When interviewing the students of the social sciences school in this institution, however, they were not aware of the learning triangle. Yet they confirmed that the content of the courses is linked to a specific job profile, as real life cases and up-to-date topics are selected. Also the lecturers did not explicitly refer to the learning triangle, but emphasised the job competences and the corresponding teaching content. The school has a testing commission which inspects regularly the written exams and analyse to what extent the assessment procedures link to learning outcomes and check if they are well conceptualised didactically. This commission has included the Dublin descriptors in its assessment plan. The interviewed lecturers had heard about the commission however, they had no experience how it works as their subjects were scheduled for review in the future). The students stated that they have never contacted the testing commission. As seen from this example, the principles of the Dutch qualification framework (being compatible with the qualifications framework of the EHEA) are visible within institution D.

4. **a) Are student assessment procedures undertaken in accordance to the officially stated examination rules/regulations by qualified personnel**?

As seen from the four case studies, the compliance of the student assessment procedures with the officially stated examination regulations vary per type of institution and also within the institution.

In all institutions the change of regulation has taken place due to the new accreditation framework requirements, where the practices of assessments are checked against the rules of assessment within the institution. This means that in all institutions regulations regarding assessment procedures are important and have to be taken into account. Some of those, such as timings for publishing examination results and providing feedback to students, are especially emphasized and observed by lecturers.

Within universities, the assessment procedures are checked if they are in accordance with the officially stated procedures. This is done by study directors on a monthly basis by sharing information and experiences. Course coordinators play an important role here by informing study directors and also discussing the assessment issues between different courses with teachers within a particular program.

The Universities of Applied Sciences B and D seem to have more control over the practice of student assessment procedures than universities A and C. In other words, their regulations are more institutionalized. In the University C, for example, some of interviewed lecturers were not aware of the regulation on student assessment although they have heard about it. In addition, verification checks of examinations are not done ona routine basis. Exams are mainly the responsibility of lecturers themselves - and they are checked by co-teachers and course coordinators but such practice may vary per faculty and program. Although some examinations (multiple choice) are sent to the central office for quality and assessment for verification checks, this is done on a voluntary basis. The lecturers put forward the questions and compile them into one test using the test matrix. However, they are not necessarily discussed with the colleagues from the same program. And as observed by the interviewed teacher trainer, lecturers do not know the instruments for testing very well.

This situation may change since institutions foster teachers to take exam methodology courses offered by their teacher training services either on a volunteer basis or a as part of the obligatory University Teacher Qualification training. Institution D, for example, seems to be extremely conscious of the importance of teacher training in assessment methods, since the schools have themselves advised the central administration to develop schemes which prepare the future examiners. During the trainings the examiners get acquainted with the principles of valid and reliable assessments. Participation in such courses is voluntarily. However, institution D prepares a new policy, calling on examiners to follow these courses which grant them an 'assessment certificate'. Examiners will have to produce a personal record covering the assessments they made. The responsibility to implement this is left to the schools; still institution D anticipates having a certain amount of certified examiners by 2016. Institution D also developed a blueprint identifying the different roles involved in a student's assessment and identified

measurable key competences an assessor should possess. This blueprint however was not mentioned by teachers.

b) To what extent are the procedures dependent on the judgement of a single examiner?

The procedures of assessment at the four institutions slightly differ. In the two universities A and C, the usual procedure of assessment as laid out in the regulation is dependent on a single examiner if the course is given by one lecturer. As noted by interviewees courses usually are taught by a couple of lecturers - then the grade depends on their collective judgment. Teachers also talk to peers. In case of new teachers, the practice is to check with the more experienced teachers and discuss the exams. The good practice shared in different faculties is cross-checking the examination results in in case of a single examiner when there are questionable results (e.. between 6 and 7, or 5 and 6).

In all institutions oral examinations as well as final theses have to be assessed by two examiners. While the first examiner is usually the lecturer, a second one usually is a member of the Examination Board. The practice as seen from interviewed lecturers and students corresponds to this code of conduct. In the student assessment regulation it is stipulated: "to safeguard the objectivity of the assessment, in addition to the supervising teacher, a second rater gives an assessment of the work placement or thesis. The second rater primarily examines the product." The objectivity of assessment has become a concern in all institutions due to the new requirements of the Accreditation Framework.
The examiners assessing final thesis have to fill in a common form for the whole institution (similar for both BA and MA) where a set of criteria and questions have to be met and answered by the examiners.

In the Universities of Applied Sciences, further modifications of examining practices are carried out. In one of the schools in the institution B, for example, the policy of assessment foresees that teaching and assessing are separated. This entails that the lecturer is not the one who assesses the students as a method of quality assurance. As this policy turned out to be highly demanding to the staff according to the interviewees it is about to be adjusted.

Another University of Applied Sciences, institution D has the informal rule that assessments are carried out by at least two examiners who have to reach the agreement. Although this expectation is not formally manifested, a school not complying with it has to explain itself to the management and external audit. The so-called "4-eyes policy" postulates that before submitting the final grade of a written exam to the examination officer two examiners must have officially looked at it. Although this policy has always been in place, the actual check did not happen, according to the interviewed lecturers. Students were not aware of the 4-eyes policy for written exams as well. The member of the exam commission stated, that this will change in the future and it will be checked stronger by the exam office (they can reject an exam if the policy is not applied).

5. Do student assessment procedures have clear and published criteria for:

- marking?

Yes. Course descriptions have clear criteria for marking. They are described in study guides, exam regulations and available to the students online in all four institutions. At the program level, they are described in the education and examination regulation. The level of detail and rules published varies per faculty/school.

- student absence, illness, or other mitigating circumstances?

Yes. The study and examination regulation has explicit rules about absence due to personal circumstances. The student can re-sit the examination in due time. The current revised rules allow for two re-sits per course. The interviewed students were aware of these rules and knew they need to contact study coordinator in such a case.

- informing students on the type, method, and criteria of assessment?

As noted previously in section on information, information of students is prescribed in the OERs and followed in the study guides (student handbooks). The students are also orally informed by the lecturers on what will be assessed (what are the learning objectives), in what way, as well as how the exams will be marked. This also includes the weight that certain interim scores will have. Additional information regarding the criteria of assessment is provided to students from lecturers and study advisors.

- student class participation?

If students are obliged to attend the classes to be able to pass the assessment, this is described in the study specific education regulation and students know about it. As a rule, the attendance is not obligatory. However, the lecturers are encouraged and do include class participation as an important element for the final grade. Due to the changes in the law as well as changing financing of studies in the Netherlands, a more conscious approach is taken by the university management to ensure that students graduate on time. As part of this trend, the study directors encourage lecturers to pay more attention to formative assessment and to check the interim progress.

- exam enrolment?

Traditionally students in Dutch institutions have had many opportunities to retake the exams. During a particular academic year depending on the institution, students have two or three possibilities to enrol in the exam.

6. Are student assessment procedures subject to administrative verification checks? If so, how are the verification checks made?

Yes, student assessment procedures are subject to administrative verification checks. The overall policy as stated in the first section is to ensure the validity, reliability and

comparability of the exams. Different bodies and officers are responsible for this ranging from the education directors, examination boards, quality assurance and assessment evaluation administrative units and faculty management responsible for education. At the ground floor- the verification check is carried out by co-teachers and course coordinators.

In addition, due to external accreditation procedures, the internal verification checks are formalized in the form of self-evaluation reports. The self-evaluation of study programmes is carried out once in six years, where the learning objectives of the study programmes are checked and from 2012 – also the examination procedures and their link with the learning objectives will be studied. In between the six year's period, the education commission checks the study program quality, which also includes checking exam procedures. However, it is the main responsibility of the examination committee of the programme to make sure that the examination rules are properly applied. In practice however, interviews noted that this does not happen very often. If the results on the assessments indicate that different groups are evaluated differently, this is compared and if necessary, adjusted. Another example some assessments are re-evaluated again randomly. If differences are observed, the person who assessed and the person who made the assessment discuss and agree on the objectives and the assessments.

> Besides these common verification checks at all institutions, there are some specific procedures developed in some case study institutions to ensure the validity of the tests.
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> In University C, for example, upon request, the quality and assessment central office advises faculties, degree programmes and individual teachers about test/exam construction and analysis of the tests. The validity of the multiple-choice tests can be processed and analysed at the office with the aid of a computer programme. Similar analyses are also possible for open question tests. However, this is a voluntary procedure which is largely used by the novice teachers who are not used to multiple-choice tests. In the view of the quality assurance officer, with the new rules of accreditation and the increased use of mutiple-choice tests due to incrased student numbers this procedure may turn into a more routine exercise, since more study directors will want to verify the tests in their programmes.
>
> Another interesting example was found in Institution D. Its social sciences school checks the assessment procedures through a 'testing committee'. This is an advisory body to the examination committee. Its main role is to check the exams from a didactical point of view after the exam took place and investigate to what extent the learning outcomes were measured. After their analysis, feedback is given to the lecturers.

7. How do student assessment procedures reflect on students' knowledge and skills gained at the secondary education level?

Students are admitted to the higher education institution on basis of a specific educational qualification. Students may vary in their educational background once admitted, and some may receive exemption from certain courses. This is part of the intake procedure and guarantees a certain level of students' knowledge and skills; once admitted the assessment procedures do not specifically take into account student's knowledge and skills gained at the secondary level. During the course of study, some schools/faculties offer supplementing courses directed towards obtaining specific skills (i.e. computer programme skills; statistic skills).

Some interviewed schools/faculties experience difficulties with the different levels of student skills and knowledge they get from school. For example, the 'soft' sciences faculty in the institution C realized that students lack argumentation skills. Lecturers saw the discrepancy between student expectations and skills, students took longer than one year to finish their first year of studies. To tackle this problem they started to organize courses that develop academic writing and argumentation skills in the first year. It was started by a working group of lecturers which later got institutionalized. In the institution D, lecturers can take the different backgrounds to some extent into account during their lectures (they may offer to take additional training for particular students). However, the assessment procedures are the same for all students. In this institution lecturers emphasized that students can always contact them and ask for additional help or clarification. This is, however, not considered as a substitute of assessment procedures reflecting the knowledge and skills students gained at secondary education.

8. What is the role of external actors, including QA agencies, in student assessment procedures?

All interviewees in different faculties/schools in the four institutions and at the central administration noted that the Dutch and Vlanders Accreditation Organization (NVAO) new accreditation rules are important for the student assessment procedures. The self-evaluation reports also note that the Dublin descriptors and the Dutch National Competence Framework (Based on the European Qualification Framework) are important in guiding the institutional study and examination regulation as well as assessment plans. The NVAO rules focus the attention in the accreditation procedure on learning outcomes and how these are linked to the assessment. In this way NVAO is considered to have a large impact on student assessment procedures at institutional level. These rules give Examination Boards more rights and responsibilities. They focus explicitly on the validity and reliability of the exams and how they link with the learning outcomes. Further, the revised Higher Education and Research Act (September, 2010) is important for the enhanced role of the student assessment policies and procedures. As noted by the quality and assessment officer in institution C:

"Taken together, the new law aiming at a stronger check of student assessments and a greater responsibility for the examination committee and the recent so-called "InHolland scandal"[1] have had the positive side effect on a renewed focus on the quality of

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[1] The report published in 2008 by higher education inspectors revealed that the InHolland HBO institution distributed degrees who failed to meet the required standards.

assessment. At the same time we in higher education are preparing for the implementation of the new system of accreditation that, via an institutional audit, involves the executive boards more than it did in the past. Thus throughout the institution the quality of assessment and the guaranteed quality of degrees are under the spotlight."

Another important institution, which represents employers' point of view in the study programs are the employers committees, which are linked to the education committees. Their role is stronger in the Universities of Applied Science than in universities due to their specific mission. These committees mainly give advice regarding the curriculum and provide feedback how graduates are valued on the labour market. They can also provide advice on the student assessment forms, especially when it comes to student placements (more important in the Universities of Applied Sciences). For instance, different schools in institution D have a strong relation with regional employers. In case the final student thesis is conducted in a company, the company is involved in determining the grade of the final thesis in consultation with the thesis supervisor. In case students collaborate with companies in some projects then the company is involved in giving feedback. Each student internship results in a report made by the student which is also checked with the internship company. As noted by teachers from University D, next to this formal contact, there is informal contact with potential employers about 'what is needed'. This is considered as essential, and the feedback might lead to changes in assessment procedures. However, as seen from other interviews with teachers and education directors, the involvement of these committees in the matters of student assessment may be marginal, especially in the universities, where their role may be more symbolic than real. Thus, it varies very much per different type of institution, different faculty and discipline.

Student assessment procedures have become a top priority in the Dutch professional (Universities of Applied Sciences) higher education context and it is expected to even further be enhanced. It is feared that if the professional higher education institutions are not able to deal with this topic successfully, it might be that assessments will be formulated and held at the national level, which would further enhance the importance of the national accreditation bodies.

9. a) Have there recently been significant changes made in student assessment procedures to improve their effectiveness?

There have been changes taking place in student assessment procedures as prescribed by NVAO focusing on learning outcomes and matching these in assessment. It is perceived as a significant change in the student assessment procedures. This includes a more conscious approach towards testing (e.g. limited number of re-sits of exams) and an increased responsibility of the Examination Board and the examination committee which is placed alongside the study program. The link between student assessment and learning outcomes is made more explicit at all levels. The examination matrix is used to make sure the tests link with the learning outcomes. Besides these overall changes common to all four institutions, a few particular changes can be attributed to specific institutions.

In institution A, emphasis is made on the peer review of the student assessment not only internally within the program and within the faculty/school, but also external peer review, either via accreditation procedures, or in addition – as a good practice. In the opinion of a lecturer from the institution A, this would unify study programs in the same disciplines across different institutions.

In Institution B, more time is spent on preparing the assessments and providing feedback to students about their performance. Assessment is seen as a joint responsibility of more than one lecturer. In terms of feedback to students, the main change took place in 2011. Traditionally students would receive feedback in five weeks after the exam (the results were made available three weeks after the assessments) and this moment of feedback was only meant for the students who failed the exam. The newly introduced feedback is geared towards all students and provides a general explanation of what they should have done during the assessment. The moment of feedback is decoupled from the moment when students learn about their grades. These two moments have their own function. The trial of this procedure was in June 2011 and proved to be successful and is envisaged to continue.

In Institution C a shift towards multiple choice tests in the areas with increased numbers of students (social sciences) can be observed. There is a perception that assessment increasingly is regulated from the center of the university and that lecturers are more controlled. There is more emphasis on interim assessment of student progress to improve student progression (hard sciences faculty).

Institution D is determined to increase the quality of examiners by certifying them. Other changes made it compulsory for students to register for written and digital exams (via an electronic registration system) and give proof of their identity during exams. In addition the students reported that now there is an additional information provided during the exam on what is examined and what materials can be brought to the exam. The new policy also foresees that summative assessments lead to at least 3 study points. Every student needs to reach a certain number of study points a year in order to attend classes for the next year. The university management has increased the number of study points from 40 to 48 (out of 60) in the last years. The university management believes that this will motivate students to study harder and that it guarantees study progress (an evaluation showed that increasing the number of points did not result in more drop-outs). The students stressed that they agree with increasing the number of study points, as it would stimulate the students' progress. The combination of these changes is considered as an improvement of the effectiveness of student assessment procedures.

> b) Can you identify any aspect of student assessment procedures you especially approve of?

The teachers in Institution A approve the uniform approach of providing detailed study guides to students. They think that assessing group work is still problematic in their

institution. The interviewed students in this institution approve of written examinations. They are satisfied with the feedback possibilities if they fail the exam. They also think that lecturers are willing to explain the subject matter additionally if needed. At the same time, the students are not happy if it takes longer than three weeks to receive the examination results.

In the institution C, hard sciences faculty likes interim assessment and is in favour of new policy development in the faculty. However, the director for education of the faculty does not approve of more quality assurance procedures, additional documents and increasing number of policy advisors. In his view–when there are scarce resources the money should better go to more teachers to improve the quality of teaching. The central administration officer noted that:

1. Many programs have a regulation for testing, there is communication of administrators with teachers and then there is more uniformity.
2. If the examination committee takes the responsibility in a good way, they take care of student complaints – and then teachers know that somebody looks at this.
3. The student assessment framework fits well into quality assurance – which is not at the level of courses, but goes deeper into programs, so they fit not only for accreditation, but also for the PDCA cycle of internal quality assurance.

Institution D approves the attempts in formulating/developing assessment trainings and key competences for their examiners. In addition the implementation of the learning triangle and the key competences is favoured, and one school has fully and coherently implemented this. Also the interviewed students especially approved the mix of different assessment procedures. The students indicated that the content is very up-to date and practically oriented. Although the different projects, interim assignments and final presentations entail substantial work, they prepare them well for the labour market. In their view, the different aspects studied during their presentations (e.g. attitude, behaviour, outfit, content, presentation skills) make it similar to a real case. The students favoured that the assessments are strongly aligned to the practical side.

5. Conclusion: major findings and policy recommendations

a. Identification of barriers to implementation of student assessment procedures with relevance to supranational level

The awareness about the ESG in relation to student assessment is not spread in the institutions although it is different with the awareness of the European Qualification Framework (due to the importance the Dutch qualification framework). The policy makers in the Netherlands could benefit from using ESG more actively in legitimizing the needed changes in student assessment and would perhaps enable institutional policy makers to legitimize better their changes in policies as well.

b. Identification of barriers to implementation of student assessment procedures with relevance to national level

The new Dutch accreditation framework works as a catalyst for implementing the alignment of course learning objectives to assessment and examination content and procedures. At the university the change is slow- and the academic freedom of lecturers is preserved in the matters of student assessment. This is one of the few areas that still has been the domain of lecturers, although subject to the peer review scrutiny upon request. There seems to be a difference between how student assessment has been regulated at universities and in the HBO sector. The procedures seem to be more elaborate and versatile in the HBO sector. Looking at the implementation, since universities seem to be less centralized than HBO institutions, the new regulations seem to be rather loosely implemented in universities (although it is still early to assess the implementation of the recent legal changes of the new accreditation framework and the new requirements of the Higher Education Act. The awareness of the changes in the student assessment has been varied in the two types of higher education institutions. At the national level the difference between the two sectors may be a barrier for implementation, since universities are less professionalized in this respect compared to HBO sector.

c. Identification of barriers to implementation of student assessment procedures with relevance to institutional level

The practices of implementing changes related to student assessment varied per faculties and schools in the four institutions, which point to the importance of disciplinary cultures in adopting specific changes. The role of teachers in decision-making regarding student assessment under the new regime increases via the additional powers given to the Examination Board and examination committees in both types of institutions in the Dutch higher education system. At the same time, since the policy changes have been rather recent in the Dutch higher education system in the area of student assessment, it will take time to be implemented and adopted at the faculty/school level.

Further specific barriers can be identified per institution:

The institution's B policy of separating lecturers from examiners was challenging to manage in practice. Although in theory it was meant to improve the quality of the student assessment, it turned to be highly demanding for the staff and for the organization and will need adaptation in order to keep the quality high.

In the Institution C the differences among and within the faculties in student assessment organization makes it difficult to implement an institution-wide policy on student assessment. More unified rules and awareness building via the quality assurance procedures seem to start gaining ground via policy officers in the faculties. However, local traditions and ways of working prevail. At the same time – the work of policy officers in the faculties and new regulations are perceived as additional cost for the faculties, while in fact, what is needed is more funding for academic staff itself.

In the institution D the complex assessment system is in place with institutional rules and different steps/requirements at the school level. It might be challenging to fully understand and implement such a system at the ground floor. In addition some procedures might be very timely but can be implemented only incrementally.

d. Identification of examples of good practice

Examples of best practice at the national level

- The role of the Examination Board has been strengthened in higher education institutions by the Higher Education Act in September 2010, drawing attention to the validity, reliability, impartiality and comparability of student assessment procedures.
- The QF from the EHEA has been adopted by the NVAO and applied to the Dutch context.

Examples at the institutional level

Overall, the policy of being conscious of measuring the intended learning outcomes and other program objectives in student assessment can be seen as good practice. This policy is enacted in different ways in the four institutions, but the common feature of centralized action linked to the accreditation and quality assurance procedures of the institutions seems to be a viable way to introduce this new policy if it is coupled with the bottom-up consultation processes.

Example of best practice at institution A

- As this is a relatively small university, the decision making lines are short and discussion on the different organizational levels take place to assure top down implementation. Also, as a more bottom up approach, it can be said that the education committees and other decision making structures are seriously considered and have the possibility to influence student assessment policy. This is especially true at the level of the study programs.
- The uniformity of forms of BA theses assessment is appreciated by students and staff. They are clear to all and this is aligned policy throughout the institution.

Example of best practice at institution B

- A flyer is produced which provides guidelines on student assessment. Its purpose is to increase the awareness of teachers about the changes in the student assessment procedures, about a more conscious approach towards student assessment.
- The possibility for students to receive feedback about the results of their exams can be seen as a good practice. Students and lecturers were positive about the feedback opportunity that all students received directly after the examinations.

- The advisory committee created to give feedback to teachers on the way they design their assessments can also be identified as a positive aspect of the student assessment procedures. If provides the opportunity to improve the quality of assessments and is a learning opportunity for teachers.

Example of best practice in Institution C

- The practice of preparing the exams in consultation with senior colleagues and organizing groups to discuss the examinations can be seen as a good practice
- The provision of the administrative services which check the quality and validity of exams and having this as an institution-wide practice can be seen as exemplary as giving good feedback for lecturers in their exam preparation
- The provision of courses on student assessment procedures, policies and techniques for all teaching staff is good practice.

Example of best practice in Institution D

- Institution D has developed robust and measurable learning outcomes for all its schools/study programs, which are regularly checked with the employers and this can be perceived as a good practice for the University of Applied Science.
- Social sciences school has an assessment committee looking at the didactical side of the exams and providing training/feedback to the examiners.
- A group of teachers within social sciences school exchanges their exams and discusses their length, difficulty and comprehension. In addition they ask each other to assess a written exam in case of doubt. This group of lecturers voluntarily checks their lectures with the aim for improvement.
- The Qualifications framework for the EHEA is visibly implemented in institution D (strong learning outcomes/ competence cards). At the school level a strong connection to the Dublin descriptors is made in assessment plans.

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