

Quality review in higher education is heading for the better

The Dutch and Belgian Court of Audit found in a joint examination that quality review in higher education both in the Netherlands and in Belgium is highly developed. However, the functioning of quality assurance in educational institutions themselves could be improved in several aspects.

The process of accreditation by the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation organisation (NVAO) has been duly set up. The appraisal contained in inspection reports remains, however, often too procedural by nature and the evidenced-based approach is not always sufficiently elaborated. However, the NVAO is left to base its accreditation decision on these inspection reports.

Accreditation system

Accreditation implies that educational programmes meet certain minimal quality requirements for higher education. In the Netherlands and Flanders higher educational programmes are accredited by a bi-national, independent body, the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation organisation (NVAO). The quality assurance system consists of an internal part and an external part. Internal quality assurance is ensured by the educational programme institution itself whereas the external quality assurance starts with a self-assessment and is subsequently implemented by external experts.

Internal quality assurance meets the requirements, but leaves room for improvement

The introduction of the accreditation obligation – in the Netherlands in 2002 and in Flanders in 2005 – has had a stimulating effect on the development of internal quality assurance in the educational institutions. Educational programme institutions implement the required assessments, but are not able to work out targets that are sufficiently accurate and serve as guidance for the quality of the course programme.

Staff, students, alumni and the employers' circles involved are to be actively associated as laid down in the accreditation framework. Access to these last two target groups is difficult in the Netherlands as well as in Flanders.

External quality assurance is not always clearly evidence-based

External quality assurance is articulated around three stages: self-assessment, inspection visits by a committee of independent experts and accreditation by the NVAO. Course programme institutions provide usable self-assessment reports for inspection visit committees, but are on the cautious side when it goes to state points of improvement. The Dutch and the Belgian Court found that opinions issued by the inspection visit committees are not always clearly evidence-based. Moreover, committees are too limited in their international make-up. The NVAO has defined the content of its task and activities properly. There should, however,

be more clarity as to the way they appraise the accreditation requests. As a result the lack of transparent self-assessment is reflected through inspection visit reports in the presentation of the arguments for the accreditation decision. The NVAO has few possibilities to obtain additional information or implement additional oversight and does not use them much either.

Cost and oversight are not the same in the Netherlands and in Flanders

The cost for internal quality assurance is not sufficiently known, neither in the Netherlands nor in Flanders. At higher schools the cost of inspection visits for (technical higher school) bachelors are higher in the Netherlands than in Flanders. In the Netherlands these institutions are most often visited separately. Another difference is that in the Netherlands VAT is charged. Oversight by the minister concerned of the accreditation system is more limited in Flanders than in the Netherlands. The accredited institutions are registered in both countries for they alone are entitled to funding and allowed to grant degrees. The Dutch Court found one institution that was not accredited for some time, but was still registered.

The Dutch and Flemish educational ministers' answer and Dutch and Belgian Court's final response

The Dutch and Flemish ministers for education both expressed satisfaction at the main conclusion of the report, namely that the higher education quality assurance system is highly developed. The NVAO is particularly pleased that internal quality assurance has improved in terms of significance and intensity. The accreditation system has had a positive contribution to this improvement, according to the NVAO. The Dutch and Belgian Courts have taken notice favourably of the Dutch and Flemish responses and found for a large part of their remarks a confirmation of the conclusions and recommendations contained in their audit report.