

## Chapter 13

# Accreditation in The Netherlands: an improvement of external quality assessment?

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### Introduction

This chapter will give some information about the systems of external quality assessment used in The Netherlands over the last 20 years. Let me begin with a short history.

### A short history

Key dates of the accreditation system in The Netherlands are as follows:

- 1985 Agreement about external quality assessment
- 1988 First cycle of external programme reviews
- 2002 From improvement to accountability
- 2003 A system for accreditation in The Netherlands
- 2005 A Dutch–Flemish accreditation organization

In 1985 the Ministry of Higher Education and Science published a document entitled *Higher Education: Autonomy and Quality* [1]. According to this document, quality was the responsibility of the HEIs (higher education institutions) and they were therefore accountable for their internal evaluation. The external quality assessment was seen as a task for a newly created inspectorate for the universities.

In the opinion of the universities, however, quality assurance is the responsibility of the institutions themselves, and in 1986 it was agreed that the institutions would take care of quality assessment through evaluation. They would do that by internal evaluation and by periodical external

quality assessment. The institutions would develop a co-ordinated and public external quality assessment system. In 1988, the first experiences were gathered.

In 2002, a shift was made from the Scylla of improvement to the Charybdis of accountability [2]. Some people judged the existing system to be too lenient and were in favour of more external pressure and a possibility of sanctions against weakly performing institutions. A function of improvement was not enough, they wanted to add a function of accountability.

In 2003, a system of accreditation was introduced in The Netherlands. Accreditation is described as “a formal judgment that the quality of a degree course or an institution meets certain standards. This judgment is based on quality assessment. And precisely this necessary quality assessment shows that accreditation and quality assurance are connected.” [3].

In 2005, the Dutch–Flemish accreditation organization was formally founded. This organization decides whether the programmes of the HEIs meet the legal requirements. Programmes have to meet a basic quality in order to be allowed to deliver certificates which are recognized by the government. A positive decision qualifies the degree course for funding by the government.

### Description of the chosen external quality system

The chosen external quality system can be described in the following points:

- Internal quality care as a starting point
- Writing of a self-study report

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- Visit of an external review committee
- Report of the external review committee
- Meta-evaluation by the inspectorate

At the beginning, the internal quality care was accentuated. Greater autonomy and more freedom were welcomed by the universities. Autonomy and quality assurance as two sides of the same coin were not disputed. But the HEIs could not agree to external quality assessment being the task of an authority outside the institutions themselves.

Writing a self-study report was the first step in the evaluation process. A format for this self-study report was given. The report had to cover topics such as objectives, structure and content of the programme, input–throughput–output of students, teaching and learning environment, feasibility, quality of the graduates, effectiveness of the organization, and quality of personnel, facilities, internationalization and internal quality care.

Next, a visit of an external review committee was organized. In this committee, peers, an educationalist and sometimes a student participated. On the basis of the self-study report, this committee discussed matters with the board, teachers, students and graduates. Clarification, verification and gathering of additional information were the aims of these discussions. Similar programmes of different institutions were visited by the same committee.

Strengths and points of attention were described in a report by the external review committee. The aforementioned self-study report topics directed this description. Since the committee visited all similar programmes, descriptions of some general aspects of the discipline were possible. The function of improvement was important in the reports of the external review committees.

A meta-evaluation was performed regularly by the inspectorate. In this way, some additional remarks could be made if external review committees were too positive or not positive enough. The inspectorate also had an opportunity to formulate warnings to the programmes. These warnings could lead to visiting activities by the inspectorate or to special attention of the review committee by the next round.

### Important characteristics

The following are important characteristics of the quality assurance system:

- Final responsibility by the institutions
- Peer assessment has an important role
- Formal sanctions as an exception
- Improvement as an important issue
- Trust as a leading principle

For the first 15 years, the quality assurance system was based mainly on internal quality assessments. The responsibility for the quality care was given to the HEIs. Although there was an external review committee and a meta-evaluation by the inspectorate, no important decisions were made by external agencies. The autonomy of the institutions was respected.

Another leading principle was that peers were viewed as being the most competent reviewers in a system of external quality assessment. Traditionally, there was no inspectorate for the universities in The Netherlands. It came by surprise in 1985. The universities tried to keep or even broaden their autonomy as fast as possible. They accepted the authority of peers, but there was a resistance to accept the authority of the inspectorate.

The external quality assessment was not threatening, because there were no formal sanctions. Nevertheless, the system had a positive influence. The self-study reports were public, there was a growing openness about educational programmes, external review committees brought ideas from elsewhere and there was a positive drive for improvement at the HEIs.

The function of improvement turned out to be very important. Exchange of ideas, co-operation, common projects and action programmes followed the reports of the external review committees. The reports concentrated on strengths and points of attention and not on weaknesses. There was a growing interest of the institutions for education as distinguished from research.

This first period of external quality assessment was based on a positive attitude. The function of improvement had an important role, and there was less suspicion and fear. There was hardly any reason

for distrust because the consequences of the external review were limited. The institutions learned a lot by writing a self-study report, and most external review committees were very helpful in finding improvements.

### **Description of the chosen accreditation system**

The accreditation system can be summarized by the following steps:

- Periodical accreditation as an obligation
- Writing a self-study report
- Visit by an external review committee
- Report by the external review committee
- Decision by the Dutch–Flemish accreditation organization

Since 2003, there has been an obligation of an accreditation system. All educational programmes of HEIs need an accreditation every 6 years. Accreditation qualifies the degree course for government funding, students of the course receive study grants and the institution that provides the course is entitled to issue degree certificates that are recognized by the government.

Writing a self-study report is still the same. However, the requirements are more specific. The format asks for six subjects, which together cover 21 facets, and are related to a number of explicitly formulated criteria. Instructions about measurable indicators are less ambivalent. The possibility of appendices is nearly endless, which leads to an immense amount of papers, reports, regulations, plans and so on.

A visit by an external review committee is still on the agenda. This visit is organized by an intermediate organization which is responsible for the resulting report. An important difference is that this committee has to judge the six subjects in terms of excellent, good, satisfactory and unsatisfactory. The available criteria, however, are not clear and are ambiguous. Therefore these decisions are not based on very strong foundations.

A report of the external review committee is also a part of the system of accreditation. It is necessary that this report is quite clear in judging the six

subjects: objectives of the programme, quality of the programmes, quality and quantity of the personnel, available facilities, internal quality care and achieved results. Via the intermediate organization, the report is given to the institution. This institution for higher education can use the report as an element in the accreditation procedure.

The accreditation decision is taken by the Dutch–Flemish Accreditation Organization. The self-study report is not available for this organization. They have to decide on the basis of the report of the external review committee, but they have an opportunity to gather additional information on their own. There is a fear that bureaucratic elements dominate the approach of the Dutch–Flemish Accreditation Organization.

### **Important characteristics**

There are various important characteristics of the accreditation system:

- Final responsibility by an external organization
- Doubts about the value of peer review
- A possibility of rigorous formal sanctions
- Accountability as an important issue
- Distrust as a leading principle

The introduction of an accreditation system introduces at the same time a more important role for the external authorities. The authority of the peers is more or less replaced by the authority of the governors. Both peers and governors are necessary in the existing system. A danger, however, is that now governors use the weaknesses in the arguments of the peers in order to justify the decisions of the governors.

The new accreditation system seems to illustrate some doubts about the value of peer reviews. A bureaucratic view of the accreditation organization is superior to the report of an external review committee from peers. This can lead to a vague mixture of professional and governmental arguments. Both sets of arguments are valuable, but a vague mixture will lead to a lot of misunderstandings.

Dittrich [3] states: “An advantage for the government is that these decisions on accreditation may subsequently also can be used for

political decisions". This statement makes clear that it is acceptable to mix professional and political decisions. This seems to be an unacceptable solution. Professional and political arguments have their own value, but hiding political decisions in professional arguments is misleading and unwanted.

Preference for a function of improvement does not mean that accountability is not important. Accountability, however, has to specify its own criteria. There are several possibilities for this specification in terms of realized results, average costs, impact on national and international projects, and so on. Trying to transform professional criteria into political arguments is misleading and generates distrust and suspicion.

Distrust seems to be a factor in moving from improvement to accountability. It is understandable that peers try to defend their colleagues. It is hard to solve this problem. Replacing professionals with governors leads to a mixture of arguments and not to a clarification of the situation. Arguments based on the quality of peers have to be distinguished from arguments based on political arguments. A mixture of arguments leads to unclear situations.

### **Arguments for accreditation**

Arguments in favour of accreditation include the following:

- An impulse to improve quality
- International benchmarking
- Transparency of the quality of education
- Clear governmental consequences
- Keeping variety in quality assessment

An impulse to improve quality is expected from the introduction of accreditation. The existing quality assurance system was seen to be losing some of its effectiveness. Some routines were developed and the intended improvements were not always realized. It was expected that a more severe approach would lead to a new and more effective system for quality assurance. Accreditation was the result.

International benchmarking as stimulated by the declaration of Bologna was also seen as an argument for introducing a system of accreditation. Comparable information about educational

programmes in education is needed in order to facilitate mobility of students within Europe. The Bologna process tries to stimulate mobility of students and therefore a comparison of relevant information is needed. Accreditation can enable comparisons between countries.

By developing a system with a limited number of subjects, specified in a number of facets and related to clear formulated criteria, a greater transparency of the quality of education may be expected. To make subjects, facets and criteria explicit is undoubtedly an important contribution to the improvement of comparability and transparency of programmes of the HEIs.

Accreditation leads to clear governmental consequences. A positive decision on accreditation qualifies the degree course for government funding, students of the course receive study grants and the institution that provides the course is entitled to issue degree certificates recognized by the government. A decision not to award accreditation has the opposite consequences [3].

The detailed format of accreditation in subjects, facets and criteria makes it possible to demonstrate the variation in programmes for higher education. Programmes are able to choose a specific profile. Up to now, it is unclear whether institutions make use of this opportunity. Some people think that there is also a great risk of unwanted uniformity.

### **Subjects in the accreditation system**

The accreditation system looks at the following subjects:

- Objectives of the programmes
- Quality of the programmes
- Quality and quantity of personnel
- Available facilities
- Internal quality care
- Realized results

The judgment about the objectives of the programme has to be at least satisfactory. Facets which have to be included are the level and orientation of the programme, and domain-specific requirements. For both facets, some criteria are formulated to be fulfilled.

The quality of programmes is subdivided into the following facets: (i) relationship between objectives and content of the programme; (ii) requirements of professional and academic orientation of the programme; (iii) coherence of the programme; (iv) feasibility; (v) congruence of curriculum design and curriculum content; (vi) assessment and testing; (vii) 'master proof'; (viii) final professional proof; and (ix) admission requirements.

Personnel is a very important factor in education. This leads to the following facets: (i) quality of personnel; (ii) professional or academic orientation; and (iii) quantity of personnel.

With respect to the available facilities, there is a distinction between the following facets: (i) material facilities; and (ii) guidance of students.

The subject internal quality makes a distinction between the following facets: (i) evaluation of the results; (ii) measures for improvement; and (iii) involvement of co-workers, students, alumni and professionals.

Realized results distinguish two facets: (i) realized level of education; and (ii) output of the educational programme.

### **Institutional expectations about accreditation (priorities)**

Expectations of HEIs about accreditation include the following priorities:

- Improving the quality of education
- Keeping the function of improvement
- Acceptance of decisions about accreditation
- Growing mobility of students
- Growing differentiation in education
- Rejecting many requests for accreditation

Recently, the Dutch–Flemish accreditation organization gathered information about the accreditation system. Teachers and students were asked to choose priorities out of six possible effects of accreditation [4].

Improving the quality of education was appointed as the most preferable outcome of accreditation. This probably reflects the growing attention given to the improvement of the quality of education. The visiting review committees are partly responsible

for this growing attention. These committees accentuated the improvement of quality.

Next was to keep the function of improvement. This is apparently important for teachers and students. There is probably a fear that accreditation, with its sanctions, hides improvement behind accountability. The respondents want to keep the function of improvement.

Acceptance of statements from the accreditation organization was number three. Acceptance of decisions was seen as a positive sign for accreditation. It is unclear whether the respondents had some doubts about the acceptance of accreditation. A great majority of decisions by the accreditation organization is clearly accepted.

A growing mobility of students was mentioned as the next priority for a successful accreditation system. To stimulate the mobility of students is an important element in the declaration of Bologna, but its weight in this inquiry was not that high. Quality improvement is rated higher by the responding teachers and students.

Increasing differentiation came next on the scale of positive expectations. The system of accreditation makes it possible to formulate specific objectives and to create a local concept of education. Increasing differentiation, however, does not score very highly in this enquiry by teachers and students.

Rejecting many requests for accreditation is the least popular expectation in this inquiry. This topic is probably somewhat controversial. If higher education is seen as a possibility for the happy few, one can be in favour of rejecting requests for accreditation. But rejecting requests will not support the broadening and expanding of higher education.

### **Some important changes**

Important changes in the accreditation system include those:

- From improvement to accountability
- From trust to distrust
- From peers to bureaucrats
- From institutions to government
- From decentralization to centralization

A comparison of the first quality assurance system

with the new accreditation system points at some important changes.

The function of improvement is more and more replaced by the accountability function. By keeping the self-study report and the visit of the external review committee, one tries to keep the function of improvement. The severe sanctions, however, are not an invitation to a great openness by the HEIs. These sanctions are probably an invitation for hiding the problems and window dressing.

Some distrust seems to be introduced by the system of accreditation. In 1985, the responsibility of HEIs for quality assurance was accepted by the government. Some 15 years later, it was decided to introduce an accreditation system with a substantial responsibility for an accreditation organization which was labelled as independent from the HEIs. Did something go wrong and where is this documented?

A quality assurance system with a central role for peers is replaced by a system that makes non-professionals responsible for the final decisions. Accountability decisions can be made by non-professionals, but they have to be made on the basis of their own criteria. The professional information from the external review committee is not a sound basis for accountability decisions. They are better as a starting point for improvements.

The main responsibility for quality assurance is taken away from the HEIs. An independent newly created organization is responsible for the accreditation decisions. This implies that political and non-professional arguments can play a more important role in the development of the system of higher education. Because the criteria are explicit, but still allow for different interpretations, some uncertainties (sometimes with bad consequences) are introduced.

The accreditation system implies a higher degree of centralization. The accreditation organization decides and the institutions have to take the consequences. A visiting and assessing institute organizes the activities of the external review committee, but the accreditation organization decides. The report of the external review committee is available, but this report can be rejected by the accreditation organization.

### **Unwanted effects of the accreditation system**

Unfortunately, there are unwanted effects of the system, such as:

- Accreditation is very expensive
- Accreditation stimulates bureaucracy
- Accreditation leads to uniformity
- Accreditation stimulates window dressing
- Accreditation hinders real innovation

The accreditation system is not accepted without critical remarks.

The accreditation system is seen as expensive. Compared with the existing assurance care system, the costs are doubled. The extra accountability results in additional procedures and more paperwork and costs. These costs are allocated to the Dutch–Flemish accreditation organization, by the visiting and assessing institutes and by the HEIs.

Increasing bureaucracy is seen as a second disadvantage of the accreditation system. The information which has to be given by the institutions grows and grows. The regulations for institutions, external review committees, visiting and assessing institutes, and the accreditation organization grow and expand. Even the communication between these actors becomes more and more complicated.

There is a fear that accreditation leads to uniformity. It is easy and safe to conform to traditional patterns because these traditional patterns are generally accepted. In this view, accreditation is an obstacle for innovation. New ideas and new views are risky because they can be rejected by the accreditation organization. In order to avoid risks, institutions can prefer traditional and generally accepted approaches.

A negative accreditation decision has important consequences for an HEI. This can be seen as an invitation for window dressing. Positive points are described as extensively as possible, and negative points are hardly described in the self-study report. The overall effect is that an artificial situation is created and that the external review committees have to act as detectives.

Innovation is not stimulated by accreditation. Traditional criteria seem to be leading in the process

of accreditation and institutions do not want to take risks. Nevertheless, innovation is a must in a world of increasing technological possibilities. Critical remarks related to the existing educational programmes have to be taken seriously and this means that it is unacceptable if accreditation hinders innovation.

### Some concluding remarks

The following conclusions can be drawn:

- Figures and measures tend to dominate ideas and innovations
- External requirements tend to dominate internal requirements
- An accepted system is replaced by some insecurities
- Accountability tends to dominate improvement
- Up to now, accreditation is no improvement of the existing system of external quality assessment

The importance of accreditation decisions can be seen as an invitation to concentrate on figures and measures instead of on ideas and innovations. More and more figures and measures are asked for, and there is a risk that innovations are not recognized as innovations. Accreditation tends to be conservative, which is why traditional and well-known solutions will be preferred over innovative and unknown solutions.

In an accreditation system, external requirements tend to dominate internal requirements. Comparability, international benchmarking and political decisions can play an important role. Developments within a discipline, educational concepts of an HEI and try-outs of innovations will find it hard to be acknowledged in

an accreditation system.

The quality assurance system which was introduced in 1988 was accepted well by the HEIs. The accreditation system is still criticized on several grounds: it is expensive, it is conservative, it is bureaucratic, it is complex and it is punitive. Of course, all of these characteristics can be changed, but there are no important initiatives to do so.

In 1995, Vroeijenstijn wrote a book entitled *Improvement and Accountability: Navigating between Scylla and Charybdis* [2]. It is clear that it is very difficult to combine improvement and accountability in only one system. Changing the quality assurance system from 1988 into an accreditation system seems to illustrate that improvement and accountability require a different approach.

The desirability of a function of accountability is not criticized here. Criticism is related to the combination of improvement and accountability in one and the same system. The introduction of an accreditation system seems to be an obstacle for the function of improvement. Therefore my conclusion is that, up to now, accreditation is no improvement on the existing system of external quality assessment.

### References

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