

15 The Netherlands: A Leader in Quality Assurance Follows the Accreditation Trend

MARGARITA JELIAZKOVA & DON F. WESTERHEIJDEN

15.1 The National System of Higher Education in the Netherlands

15.1.1 Place in the System of Education

The Dutch education system includes the following levels: primary education for children between the ages of four and twelve, secondary education as a continuation of primary education for pupils between twelve and (16 to) 18 years old, higher education for students aged eighteen and above, adult and vocational education and certified education (from 16 onwards). At the end of comprehensive primary education, pupils are assigned to general pre-vocational secondary education, senior secondary education or pre-university education. The general pre-vocational education (VMBO) lasts for four years and gives access to the senior vocational secondary education (MBO) and the apprenticeship system (LLW), which are both part of vocational and adult education. A third type of secondary education is the five-year senior general secondary education (HAVO), which can be directly accessed after primary education or after completing the VMBO. HAVO graduates can attend MBO or pre-university education (VWO). Pre-university education gives access to the university (WO), higher professional education (HBO) and to distance learning courses in higher education (Open University).

15.1.2 Size and Structure of Higher Education

The Dutch higher education system is a binary system and consists of 13 universities (including Wageningen Agricultural University, which is financed by the ministry of agriculture) and 56 institutions offering higher vocational education. The latter, the HBO-institutions, are somewhat comparable to the German *Fachhochschulen* or the British (former) polytechnics, although the official length of their study programmes is longer: four, instead of three years (full-time). Besides the 13 traditional public research universities, there is a limited number of small 'designated institutions': a university for business administration, four institutes for theological training and a humanistic university, as well as several international education institutes. The total number of these designated institutes is 61. They fall under the Higher Education and Research Act but do not receive government funding, and the students receive no

financial aid.¹ However, the degrees they issue are recognised. These institutions are often not included in the official statistics.

In addition to these two major sectors, higher education in the Netherlands is also provided through the Open University, located in Heerlen with a number of support centres around the country. The Open University offers a wide range of courses, leading to both formal university and higher vocational education degrees. (In statistics, it is often included in the public university sector.)

There are no other formal sectors of post-secondary education in the Netherlands. In addition, the ‘designated’ institutes and organisations offer a large number of recognised certificates, diplomas and degrees in various professional fields such as accountancy, business administration, etc. These are usually structured as ‘external studies’ in the sense of distance learning courses with limited face-to-face interaction.

15.1.3 Types of Degrees

The distinction between vocational education and university education still remains under the newly introduced bachelor-master system. For the universities, the bachelor-master structure is now becoming the norm. This means that the programmes are split in two parts:

- A bachelor’s part consisting of 180 credits (in ECTS-equivalents);
- A master’s part consisting of (as a rule) 60 credits.

For the higher vocational institutions, the existing first degree courses continue to be considered as a bachelor’s course of 240 credits. The higher vocational institutions can also offer (professional) Master’s courses. The courses offered at the moment will only be officially recognised if they obtain accreditation from the Netherlands Accreditation Organisation (NAO).

Access to master’s programmes is based on the entrance requirements determined by the institutions. In general, students are admitted on the basis of their having completed a relevant bachelor’s programme. The law specifies that every academic bachelor programme should give entrance to at least one academic master’s programme. In those cases where the master’s programme does not correspond to the bachelor’s programme, admission may be selective. A master’s degree will be required for entrance to doctoral programmes.

1 The new accreditation scheme will change this arrangement; any accredited programme, regardless of the institution’s funding, will entitle students to receive financial aid.

15.1.4 Types of Programmes

Government-funded higher professional education courses cover the following seven areas: Education, Economics, Behaviour and Society, Language and Culture, Engineering and Technology, Agriculture and Natural Environment, and Health Care. Most HBO-institutions offer courses in several of these fields.

Of the 13 universities, nine carry out teaching and research in a broad range of disciplines spanning seven sectors: Economics, Health, Behaviour and Society, Law, Engineering and Technology, and Language and Culture. Three focus on engineering and technology. The Agricultural University in Wageningen provides courses in the field of agriculture and the natural environment.

In both higher education sectors, there are full-time and part-time courses. Dual courses combining learning and work were introduced on an experimental basis in 1998/99.

The total number of programme types listed in the Central Register of Higher Education Study Programmes (CROHO) is 117. Within these programmes, students are to some extent free to combine their own programmes. Equally, with the approval of the relevant examining board students may establish their own degree studies by selecting from different programmes.

15.1.5 Transition from Higher Education to Work

Close contacts between HBO institutions and the labour market are extremely important. They occur at both national and individual course level. Each year a national survey of HBO-graduates, known as the HBO-Monitor, is carried out on behalf of the HBO-Council.

Universities prepare students for research training and for occupations in which it is useful to have an academic background. Only a small proportion of graduates (around 10 %) are eventually employed in research. Like the HBO institutions, the universities monitor the position of their graduates on the labour market by means of an annual survey, which began in 1998.

15.1.6 Governance and Steering of Higher Education

The Dutch education system combines a unified education system, regulated by central laws, with decentralised administration and management of schools. Overall responsibility for the public-private education system lies with the State, represented by the Minister of Education, Culture and Science, and the legislative power of the Dutch Parliament.

The Ministry lays down the conditions, especially in primary and secondary education, relating to the types of schools that can exist, the length of courses, compulsory and optional school subjects, the minimum and maximum number of lessons to be given and their length, the norms for class division, the examination syllabus and national examinations, and standards of competence, salaries, status and teaching hours of teaching staff. The Ministry does not set up schools, but does determine the norms for their establishment. This applies to both public and private education.

The government establishes a framework within which HBO institutions have to operate, but it is the responsibility of the competent authority to expand on the Government framework concerning the teaching and examination regulations. In their education and examination regulations, HBO institutions are required to specify the teaching programme, the main subjects and the content and form of the different examinations.

The same legal framework applies for the universities. Their daily management is in the hands of the Executive board and the University Council. The Executive Board, which comprises three members, including the rector, is accountable to the Minister of Education, Culture and Science and to the University Council. The University Council comprises up to 30 representatives of the academic staff, students and the support and administrative staff.

The Information Management Group (IBG) is a semi-independent part of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science that implements the Student Finance Act (WSF) and the study costs and allowance schemes. Its other duties include the collection of school and course fees, the provision of administrative support for examinations, the placement and registration of prospective students, the evaluation of diplomas and the implementation of benefit schemes for education personnel.

The Central Funding of Institutions Agency (CFI) is the executive agency responsible for funding the education system on the basis of legislation and regulations and in accordance with the established financial frameworks. Its duties also include providing information for policy-making and funding purposes. The CFI is responsible for the proper and efficient funding of institutions. Since 1 January 1996, when the CFI acquired agency status, it has formed an autonomous part of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.

There are several advisory and consultative bodies in the Netherlands that are entitled to make recommendations on educational policy. The Educational Council (*Onderwijsraad*, OR) is a permanent advisory board which was established in 1919. Its task is to ensure continuing equal financial treatment for public and private education, the coherence of educational policy and legislation and the freedom of education. The Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences (KNAW) and the Advisory Council on Science and Technology Policy (*Adviesraad voor wetenschaps- en Technologie-*

beleid, AWT) advise on science and science policy respectively. Advisory bodies that offer advice on other matters in addition to education are the Socio-economic Council (SER) and the Advisory Council on Government Policy (*Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid*, WRR).

With regard to higher education policy, the Minister also consults the Higher Education Consultative Committee, which includes the associations of HBO colleges, universities and teaching hospitals and the national teaching organisations. Consultation takes place within the Student Consultative Committee between the Minister and representatives of the national student organisation.

Negotiations with the trade unions on conditions of service and the staff's legal status take place at various levels within the education sector, but in the higher education sector, they are between the collective universities, respectively the collective HBO-institutions, and the relevant trade unions, since the higher education institutions have become (partially) autonomous in this respect too.

Higher Education and Research Act 1993

The Higher Education and Research Act (WHW) came into force on 1 August 1993. It regulates higher education (i.e. HBO-institutions, universities, the Open University and the 'designated institutions'), teaching hospitals and academic research. This Act replaced the University Act, the Higher Professional Education Act and numerous other regulations governing higher education and research (from over 2,000 to around 300 regulations).

The administrative relationship between the government and institutions of higher education and research, as defined in the Act, is based on the following principles:

- the government should only intervene to prevent undesirable developments when self-management by the institutions is likely to have unacceptable results;
- government intervention should primarily take the form of remedying imperfections in the system *ex post*;
- the instruments at the government's disposal should be characterised by a minimum of detailed regulation;
- the institutions must lay down norms to ensure legal certainty and proper administration.

The Act grants the institutions considerable freedom in matters of programmes. They are responsible in the first instance for maintaining quality, providing an adequate range of teaching and research programmes and ensuring access to education. Quality control is exercised by the institutions themselves, by external experts and, on behalf of the government, by the Inspectorate for Higher Education. In principle, the government assesses on an *ex post* basis only whether funds have

been allocated efficiently and whether the intended results have been achieved. If major shortcomings are identified, the institutions will be informed accordingly. If discrepancies between ideal and reality persist, notably in the field of quality, the government has the option – with due regard to the proper procedures – of using coercive powers backed up by sanctions.

15.2 Accreditation and Evaluation Schemes in the Netherlands

The year 2003 marks the transition for the quality assurance systems of higher education in the Netherlands. A new accreditation system is being introduced. It builds upon (and will in part replace) the existing national systems of quality assurance.

First, we shall briefly describe briefly the previous quality assurance system and the system used until now to introduce new programmes. Then, we shall describe the design and outcomes of a pilot accreditation carried out by the Dutch HBO Council, prior to the introduction of the new accreditation system. Finally, we shall describe the new accreditation system as it has been developed so far.

15.2.1 The Quality Assurance System in the Netherlands

The Netherlands was among the first European countries to develop a formal system to assess the quality of teaching and research (van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993). In the 1980s a new steering philosophy replaced the detailed control of all kinds of input; the government would only check afterwards whether the *self-regulation* of the higher education system led to outputs in an acceptable range. In other words, the higher education institutions would be given more institutional autonomy if they proved that they ‘delivered’ quality education. True to a historical process, this ‘new steering philosophy’ was implemented before it was formulated. That happened in a policy initiative launched in the Dutch universities in 1983 concerning research, the ‘Conditional Funding’ (CF) policy.

This policy was intended to ‘promote both quality and systematic discussion of priorities and the use of resources’ in research in Dutch universities – accountability regarding government funding can be seen as an ulterior goal. The Conditional Funding policy was the first effort to assess how governmental funding for higher education was being used, changing the funding of fundamental university research from a ‘give away model’, included in the general grant to universities, to an ‘exchange model’. A successful and satisfying exchange presupposes that the receiving party can assess whether it is getting ‘value for money’.

The procedure chosen for the CF model was to have external committees of peers assess the research submitted by the universities and to guarantee the funding of the research group that was carrying it out for the next five years if the research was

assessed positively. The information about research aims, activities and outputs (mainly publications) was to be supplied to the peers by the faculties. The external committees were appointed by the Royal Academy of Arts & Sciences, the most distinguished academic body in the country, which covered all areas of science. By using the principle of peer review, which is well-known in academia, and through the involvement of the Royal Academy, legitimacy of the procedure in the eyes of the academics was sought.

The research funding was allocated to the universities, not to the faculties or research programmes. It was up to the universities, therefore, to re-allocate funds from ‘unprotected’ to ‘protected’ research as they saw fit. However, there were very few re-allocations. The universities’ decision-makers did not use the outcomes of the CF assessments for re-allocations, mostly because the assessments were very uniformly distributed. Very few research programmes were judged ‘insufficient’, and the peers declined to indicate ‘excellent’ research. The CF failed as a policy instrument for the re-allocation of funding.

What proved to be a much more influential aspect of the CF was that all research submitted for assessment was grouped into *research programmes*. Grouping together the research activities of several individuals started to become the main policy level in higher education research policy. The ‘CF research programmes’ became a lasting characteristic of research in the universities in the Netherlands, covering, at first, a significant percentage of all their fundamental research, and later practically all university-based fundamental research. Even when after two five-year rounds the CF faded away at the national level, most universities kept these research groupings for their internal administration, and they were at the basis of other research policies developed by the Ministry of Education & Science.

One of the main national policy initiatives that should be mentioned here is the training of post-graduate research assistants. Networks of researchers, often at an inter-university or even national level, were developed for that purpose. Later, these networks were institutionalised into ‘research schools’. To have a research school recognised (for a five-year period) by the Royal Academy of Arts & Sciences is considered to be prestigious by universities. The CF research programmes may not always be recognisable in the themes of these research schools anymore, but for university decision-makers across all disciplines the CF procedure popularised the idea that research could be managed at a collective level.

Introduction of Quality Assessment of Teaching

A policy paper ‘Higher Education: Autonomy and Quality’ (HOAK) was published two years after the introduction of the CF. The idea of quality assessment was to be extended from research only to all major primary activities of higher education

institutions – meaning, in fact, that quality assessment of teaching had to be developed.

In their negotiations about the implementation of HOAK in 1986, the Minister of Education & Science and the umbrella bodies of the universities, the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) and the Association of *hogescholen* (HBO Council), reached the compromise that the umbrella bodies would co-ordinate the procedures to assure the government that they ‘produced’ quality teaching without too much waste of students and time, i.e. accountability with a special emphasis on dropout ratios and time to degree. In a spirit of self-regulation, the government would not use the outcomes of the quality assessments to further change funding of higher education after the cut-backs of the period before 1985. However, if a study programme was shown to be of low quality, and there were no improvements over a number of years (after a ministerial warning popularly called ‘yellow card’), the government reserved the right to strike this study programme off the official register (‘red card’), meaning that its diploma would no longer be recognised officially and that it would no longer be funded by the government, nor would students have a right to the study grant every student of a recognised programme is given.

In the hands of the umbrella bodies, the governmental goals of accountability and quality improvement changed to quality improvement and accountability – the change in order indicates a small but significant difference in emphasis.

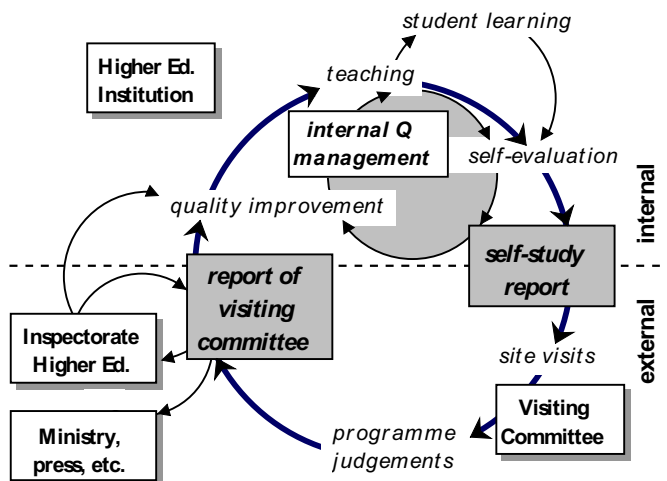
The Principles, and their Implementation in Universities

For the design of the quality assessment procedure, the VSNU borrowed from the CF assessment procedure and from the decades-long US experience with programme review and specialised accreditation. Accordingly, the entity to be evaluated through the new procedure is the *programme*, i.e. the collection of courses leading to a specific *doctorandus* degree. Ad hoc *visiting committees* of external peers judge all programmes of study in an area of knowledge in the country, basing themselves on the information contained in the faculties’ *self-evaluation reports* and on their own observations during two-day *site visits* to each of these faculties (see also Figure 1). At the end of each visit, preliminary comments and judgements about the study programme are given by the chair of the visiting committee. The final version of this text, following comments by the study programme, is included in the national, public *report of the visiting committee*.

The requirements for the self-evaluation report structure the self-evaluation process in the faculty. The VSNU guidelines for the report specify which topics should be addressed, e.g. programme aims, programme structure and content, student and staff information, data on graduates, issues of internationalisation and internal quality management. The structure of the report and the data to be used are prescribed in

detail to ensure comparability across the country, but the faculty can emphasise issues it considers to be important.

Figure 1. *Self-evaluation and visiting committees in assessment of teaching*



The self-evaluation reports are also the cornerstone of quality improvement: through the self-evaluation process, faculties ought to become aware of their strengths and weaknesses and begin to ameliorate the weaknesses, even if no external committee were involved – this is of course a normative, perhaps even idealistic picture, as sketched by proponents of self-evaluation processes.

The peer committee's judgements are collected in a national, public report, which includes the committee's frame of reference for judging the faculties, a chapter on the general state of affairs of teaching in the discipline in the country, and chapters on each of the programmes of study, with its strengths and weaknesses and the committee's recommendations for improvement. The visiting committees do emphatically not give a single, summary judgement of a study programme's quality. To do so would be contradictory to the multi-dimensional nature of the concept of quality.

This procedure has been in operation since the academic year 1987/88, the first year as a pilot project. Every year the VSNU appoints a number of ad hoc visiting com-

mittees to evaluate all programmes of study in their respective disciplines, thus covering all² programmes of study in a six-year cycle.

The Same Principles Implemented Slightly Differently in HBO Institutions

The HBO Council, the umbrella organisation of the HBO institutions, started assessing programmes of study in 1990, and because of the larger number of programmes it operates on an eight-year cycle to cover all areas of knowledge. In some areas with very many study programmes, two or more sub-committees visit them. Also, as a rule, the visits last no more than one day per study programme.

The most important differences with the VSNU procedure stem from the fact that the HBO study programmes are intended to be more ‘practice oriented’ than the academic programmes in universities. Applicability and job orientation therefore have higher priority. This influences the character of the quality judgements, and therefore also the ways of forming those judgements. Thus, the HBO Council issues its own guidelines for self-evaluation, which differ in some respects from the guidelines used by the VSNU; also, the HBO sector still being in the first round of evaluations, these guidelines are in some ways less prescriptive than those of the VSNU. And this can be seen in the composition of the visiting committees: whereas the VSNU mainly uses academic peers, the HBO Council visiting committees consist mainly of practitioners in the area of application of the study programme.

VSNU Quality Assessments of Research

After the demise of the CF procedure, the government wanted a new procedure for quality assessment of research in the universities. The procedure that the VSNU designed can briefly be characterised as an extension of experiences: of the CF experience on the one hand, and of the VSNU experience with quality assessment of teaching on the other.

From 1993 until 2003,³ *external peer committees* judged fundamental university research according to four dimensions of quality: productivity, quality of output, relevance and long-term viability. *All* of a faculty’s fundamental research was to be submitted, organised into *research programmes* as in the CF. The faculties provided the information again; bibliometric analyses of publication data were carried out by an independent bureau in a number of cases – this was new and not always part of the procedure. The committees might judge on the basis of this written information

2 With very few exceptions, mostly consisting of programmes that are unique in the country. Tailor-made solutions are developed for these ‘orchid programmes’.

3 In 2003, all major research evaluation procedures were merged into a single one in co-operation of VSNU, KNAW and NWO.

only, but they also could interview research programme leaders or visit the faculties and laboratories. National, public reports were the main output of this procedure. In contrast to the teaching assessments, the research evaluations were given in summary figures for each research programme on the four dimensions of research quality. Productivity, quality of (key) publications, relevance of the programme and long-term viability of the research group were judged separately on five-point scales ranging from (1) insufficient to (5) excellent. As with the quality assessment of teaching, there was no direct connection between quality judgements and the government's (funding) policy for higher education. How the universities and faculties used the outcomes of the quality assessment procedures is the subject of the next section.

15.2.2 Effects

There is no direct connection between the quality assessments and government higher education policy. Specifically, there are no financial rewards or sanctions for the faculties concerned. The most important, but still marginal, financial consequence would ensue if students 'voted with their feet' (taking their tuition fees with them) by evading study programmes that are judged to be weak in many respects – but there is as yet no empirical evidence that they do. To ensure that the considerable amount of effort that goes into the quality assessments is not a 'paper tiger', but that these assessments are serious and that recommendations are acted upon, the government, through the Inspectorate for Higher Education, closely follows the visiting committees' reports and the follow-up by the universities. In the jargon of Dutch politics, this is called 'meta-evaluation'.

Since 1993 when the institutional arrangement concerning follow-up was renegotiated between the government and the higher education institutions, the Inspectorate has checked whether the universities react adequately to the visiting committee's observations (Scheele, Maassen, & Westerheijden, 1998). Note that the Inspectorate did not prescribe a certain method of follow-up. To decide on its own method of follow-up was part of the university's autonomy. The Inspectorate only required that some follow-up was planned and was put in writing in an 'Action Plan'. If no adequate Action Plan ensued, the Minister of Education issued a 'yellow card', i.e. a warning that unless thorough improvements were made quickly, the programme would be stricken off the register (CROHO) the following year. Such warnings were also given when study programmes were judged to be very weak in crucial aspects. If the Inspectorate discovered such 'worrisome cases', the Minister of Education asked the university to make rapid improvements. Warnings were issued in a small minority of cases – fewer in the university sector than in the HBO sector. This threat of sanctions has always been sufficient to induce improvements. Finally, the Inspectorate checked the follow-up in a mid-term review, three years after a visiting com-

mittee report is published. This was to ensure that quality improvement plans were implemented and did not remain paper plans until the next visiting committee six or seven years later.

The proof of the pudding was, of course, in what happened with these evaluations. They were not ‘ritual dances’ – the Inspectorate for Higher Education made sure of that. It has been established independently that non-utilisation by the higher education institution (usually, the faculty) was a relatively rare (Frederiks, 1996; Frederiks, Westerheijden, & Weusthof, 1994; Weusthof, 1994). This did not mean that all faculties slavishly followed all recommendations of the visiting committees. Frederiks (1996) estimated that about half of the visiting committees’ recommendations were followed up. This was confirmed in 1999; it was found that virtually all recommendations endorsed by the visited programmes were followed up in the short or long term (Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2000). Even more important, there is no doubt that the visitation system has become part of mainstream university and higher professional education (Westerheijden, 1997).

15.2.3 The Programme Registration System

According to the 1993 Law on Higher Education and Academic Research (WHW), the following procedure was employed for the regulation of new programmes in higher education. The reason for introducing the system was Parliament’s concern that there was too great a proliferation of study programmes in the second half of the 1980s. The outcome was the establishing of the Advisory Committee for Educational Programmes (ACO). Five of its members were appointed by the minister. Its task was to assess the plans for new educational programmes submitted by the institutions. Also, when changes were proposed in the educational and examination plans, the committee decided whether these were significant enough to represent a new programme. This kind of change mainly occurred in different types of specialisations within one programme. The conclusions of ACO were presented as an advice to the institution’s management. The institution then decided whether to establish the new programme and to ask the minister to register it in the Central Registry of Higher Education Programmes (CROHO). Registration in CROHO meant that the institute might receive regular financing and that the students enrolled in the programme were eligible for student financing. If the minister decided not to follow ACO’s advice, he notified Parliament. In assessing the new programmes, the ACO took into consideration the needs for higher education in terms of total number of programmes available and of national distribution (‘macro efficiency’).

This description left leeway for interpretation. However, the ACO informed the institutions regularly by detail on the specific procedures and the information to be submitted. For example, in the 2002 round, the institution had to demonstrate that it was indeed a new programme and that it did not diminish the transparency of the

choice of programmes; that the programme met the quality requirements of the respective comparable programmes and that it was appropriate in terms of availability and geographical distribution of similar programmes.

In the first four years of the existence of the ACO, almost three-quarters of the programme proposals in the HBO-sector were rejected.

With the introduction of the accreditation scheme in 2003, the task of checking and approving new programmes is the responsibility of the NAO. This takes place on the institution's demand. The institution submits a profile description, a financial overview and a staff description of the programme. The submitted documents also indicate whether the programme is totally new or whether it already exists in other Dutch institutions. In making a decision, the NAO takes into account not only the quality of the programme, but also some financial aspects. Programmes that are totally new are in principle tested in more detail. The NAO recruits experts when necessary.

15.2.4 The Pilot Accreditation in the HBO-Sector

Already before the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science officially published the 'HOOP 2000' policy planning paper, the discussion around the Bologna process incited the HBO Council to explore accreditation, not only as an addition to the existing visitation model, but also as a possible substitute for it. An important issue for the HBO Council was whether it was possible to arrive at a more objective judgement of higher education quality. The HBO Council was mainly concerned with overcoming what it saw as the greatest shortcoming of the existing visitation system – that it produces a list of remarks and recommendations rather than an integrated overall assessment. The HBO Council took the initiative to carry out a pilot accreditation, which was to serve as the basis for a future discussion on the feasibility of introducing an accreditation system in the Netherlands. However, in practice, the pilot accreditation became one of several inputs to the discussion: not whether accreditation was feasible, but what were the right methods to perform it.

19 programmes in Social Work and 22 programmes in Commercial Economics took part in the pilot accreditation. A protocol was created, with a detailed description of the actors' tasks and of the rules for evaluation and accreditation decisions (*Protocol Proefaccreditering; Richtlijnen voor het accrediteringsproces*, 1999). The procedure was designed as follows:

First, a programme would carry out a self-evaluation study. Sufficient information was to be presented as well as an assessment based upon it concerning two distinct aspects: a) according to the guidelines for quality assessment of the programme according to the HBO standard requirements and b) according to the guidelines for assessment of management capacity.

Based on this self-study, the programme writes a three-part self-evaluation report. In the first part, general information on the institution and the programme is presented. The second part is an assessment of the programme according to the framework of the Accreditation Protocol. The framework consists of six standard criteria, further split into sub-criteria. Each of these is operationalised in a total of 80 verification points. The programme applies special calculation rules to reach an overall score of 'good', 'sufficient', 'average' and 'insufficient'. In the third part of the report, 'additional' information is presented which is to be used for a side letter with recommendations by the external visiting panel. This information is organised around 50 diagnostic questions. For each question, the programme also gives itself a score, without calculation rules.

An accreditation committee is in charge of setting up external review panels. The candidates undergo special training. After a two-day visit, the external panel writes an assessment report and gives an overall advice: positive, negative or conditional. Also, a confidential side letter with recommendations for improvement is presented to the programme after the final accreditation decision.

The pilot accreditation was monitored and evaluated by CHEPS at the request of the HBO Council (Goedegebuure, Jeliaskova, Pothof, & Weusthof, 2002). The independent monitoring and evaluation of the pilot accreditation led to two main conclusions: first, there seemed to be a general acceptance of an instrument that would demonstrate the quality of programmes in a more 'objective' way than the visitation system. On the other hand, however, the pilot accreditation exposed the problems created by too much detail and prescription of rules. It clearly showed that the balance between objectivity, legitimacy, and efficiency was not easy to find.

15.2.5 The New Accreditation Scheme

After Bologna, there was a serious discussion about the need to introduce accreditation in the Netherlands. The debate had already started around 1998. New dynamics and accountability, international transparency in Europe and beyond by positive statement of proven quality, openness of the higher education system, and the emergence of non-traditional suppliers were the key words behind the reform in the Netherlands. It became clear that the introduction of a bachelor-master system would mean adjustment of the binary system and therefore of the two-fold, though very similar, system of quality assurance. In addition, it was necessary to ensure the transparency of Dutch higher education for the international community, thereby improving its competitive position in the European knowledge market.

The Dutch Minister of Education, Culture and Science, after consulting the major stakeholders – the Association of Dutch Universities (VSNU) and the HBO Council, as well as the student organisations, decided to implement the Bologna decisions

rapidly. In November 2000, the minister appointed a ‘trailblazer’ group to prepare the introduction of accreditation in the Netherlands and to develop the assessment frameworks for the new bachelor and master programmes. The committee developed recommendations on the basis of a study of international experience and intensive consultations with all the major stakeholders (Committee Accreditation of Dutch Higher Education, 2001). It was recommended to establish an independent Netherlands Accreditation Organisation (NAO). The new accreditation system began to be introduced as from late 2002. Thus, after introducing external quality assurance in the 1980s, the Netherlands was once again amongst the first in Europe to introduce a national accreditation system for all higher education programmes, both in the university and the higher professional education sectors.

All universities and higher professional schools are subject to the scheme, whether they are public or private, if they want to award bachelor’s or master’s degrees. The basic unit of the new accreditation scheme is the programme. There is a distinction between two types of programmes – academically oriented and professionally oriented. Both types may be offered by universities or higher vocational institutions (HBO) alike. Master’s programmes and bachelor’s programmes are accredited separately. Unlike the existing practice with visitations, similar programmes do not need to be visited at the same time and evaluated in clusters, although institutions may choose to do so.

The academically oriented bachelor’s programmes are broader and are orientated towards a general background in science and acquiring basic research skills. The academically oriented master’s programmes are of two types – for professional researchers with a sufficient specialisation and for academic professionals (doctors, lawyers, engineers, etc.). The professionally oriented bachelor’s programmes target a particular profession, including practical experience. The professional master’s programmes seek to build upon these programmes in two directions – in more depth with specific competences, or in broader types of multidisciplinary programmes.

Under the newly introduced accreditation system, an independent accreditation body, the Netherlands Accreditation Organisation (NAO) is established by law (www.nao-ho.nl). The NAO has independent members with expertise in the fields of higher education, professional practice and quality assessment. They are appointed by the minister. The accreditation system is based on the same principles of self-evaluation and peer review as the existing quality assessment system. The external assessment is carried out by quality agencies, in Dutch called Visiting and Assessing Bodies (VBI) and the accreditation is given by NAO. The formal consequences of (non-)accreditation are (loss of) study grants for students, funding of the programme (in public higher education institutions only) and awarding degrees with a legal status. Accreditation is granted for a period of six years, and new programmes need to be pre-tested. A programme is accredited either as academic or professional.

Bachelor and master programmes are accredited separately. The law specifies that accreditation must take into account the following aspects of quality: level of the programme, content of the programme, educational process, returns of education, sufficient facilities and an adequate quality assessment method.

In addition to accrediting existing programmes and licensing new programmes, the tasks of the NAO are: to check existing programmes for specific quality features on their demand, to strengthen the European and international dimension of Dutch accreditation and to maintain contacts in this area.

The development of the accreditation frameworks for existing and new programmes was one of the immediate tasks of the NAO. NAO discussed the new system intensively with the institutions, experts, trade unions, students and professional organisations. The accreditation frameworks were submitted for approval to the Minister of Education, Culture and Science. The accreditation framework was officially published in early 2003.

The accreditation framework for existing programmes consists of:

- An assessment framework, including aspects, facets and criteria,
- Rules for decision-making,
- Criteria to assess the procedure and the quality of the report produced by the quality agency,
- A description of the way existing programmes will be evaluated.

The following six aspects are subject to assessment: goals of the programme, contents of the programme, staff, facilities, internal quality assessment, outcomes. The different facets of these topics are to be assessed with the respective criteria.

Facets of the topic 'programme goals' are subject-specific requirements, level, orientation (professional or academic). Facets of the topic 'programme content' are orientation (professional or academic), relationship between programme goals and programme contents, coherence of the programme, student workload, entrance qualifications, duration, matching of form and contents, assessment and testing. Facets of 'staff' are professional or academic qualifications, adequate quantity, adequate quality of staff. Facets of the 'facilities' are adequacy, student supervision. Facets of the 'internal quality assessment' are evaluation of results, measures for improvement, involvement of staff, students, alumni and professional organisations. Facets of 'results' are level achieved, returns of education.

The institution can ask the external reviewers to assess exceptional quality features of the programme, which will be noted in the report, but will not influence the accreditation decision.

The assessment implies the use of a four-point scale (excellent, good, sufficient and insufficient) and decision-making rules based on specific weights of the criteria. The rules imply that, in order to obtain accreditation, a programme must score at least sufficient on each aspect. The score per aspect is a weighed sum of the facet scores.

One of the system's proclaimed aims is to preserve the diversity and the specific character of existing programmes. Hence, it was defined as broadly as possible. According to the NAO, it has consciously chosen a broader, flexible approach. This allows for input by the institutions and leaves room for the professional insight of the external reviewers.

Higher professional schools and universities take the initiative for accreditation. They invite a quality agency to assess the quality of a programme. The quality agencies are independent bodies that are registered with the NAO; the VSNU and HBO Council will lose their virtual monopoly. This does not mean that the quality agencies are certified by the NAO. The NAO produces an annual list of quality agencies that satisfy the requirements of expertise and quality. Therefore, the NAO does not assess itself, but gives the quality seal to programmes after reviewing the quality agency's conclusions. The aspects that should be looked at by the quality agency in order to qualify for accreditation are determined by the NAO. The NAO expects the quality agency to specify discipline-relevant criteria and requirements. The quality of work and the quality of the report produced by the quality agency are tested by the NAO. Quality agencies that produce weak reports may be deleted from the list of approved organisations.

Formal Stages of the Procedure

1. The institution applies for external assessment at a quality agency. This assessment covers the topics, facets and criteria presented in the accreditation framework.
2. The institution conducts a self-evaluation and produces a report.
3. The institution asks the quality agency to assess the quality of the programme based on the self-evaluation report. The quality agency visits the programmes and verifies the conclusions of the self-evaluation report. In addition, the quality agency assesses the quality of the self-evaluation. The quality agency establishes whether the programme satisfies the minimum requirements and formulates a conclusion which is presented in the report and supported by evidence.
4. The institution applies to the NAO for accreditation and submits a quality agency report, which should not be older than one year at the moment of submission.
5. The NAO assesses the quality agency report and may ask for additional information. The accreditation decision is taken within three months. In case of a

positive decision, the programme receives accreditation for six years. If the quality agency information is not sufficient, the NAO postpones the decision.

6. The institution may appeal.
7. The decision is made public.

The accreditation decision is seen by the NAO as the logical conclusion of a system of self-evaluations and peer review that functions well. The institutions produce a self-study report, which is verified by the visiting organisation, the NAO validates it and comes out with a clear 'yes' or 'no'. No conditional accreditation is allowed. However, this would not be the Netherlands if there were no room for ambiguity. One possibility for a second chance is the scenario in which the NAO, after requesting additional information and/or a second opinion, may just withhold a decision if not satisfied. The other possibility is the period of two years given to the programme to improve after receiving a negative decision. Given the serious consequences for students (no right to governmental support, no recognised diploma), this is a necessary condition to prevent damage caused by an abrupt closure of the programmes.

Since the new system is not functioning yet, only some parallels can be drawn with the existing visitation system. Since the accreditation scheme builds upon the existing routine of self-evaluations and visitation, it is logical to ask to what extent they are fit for accreditation.

What are the main differences? In the first place, the clear 'yes' or 'no' decision about the programme's minimum quality standard. This requires a more explicit definition of the reference framework and fewer ad hoc comparisons of the programmes during the assessment. The emphasis moves inevitably from process to output. Whether this new frame of assessment will lead to more differentiated judgements on the quality of Dutch programmes remains to be seen.

It is certain, however, that there will be consequences for the traditional separation between the academic and professional sector. Until now, any university programme was automatically considered academic. Under the new system, this is no longer the case. To what extent will this lead to a shift in the type and character of programmes offered by universities and professional schools? At master's or also at bachelor's level? These are questions awaiting an answer.

The choice for quality agencies is inspired by the idea to promote diversity in the system and to make it more open to international actors. However, given the scale of Dutch higher education, only the future will show how realistic this expectation has been.

15.2.6 Other Accreditation Bodies in the Netherlands

Dutch Validation Council. In the early 1990s, a proposal was made to establish a validation system for separate Master's programmes. The independent Dutch Validation Council (DVC) was established in 1997 at the request of the HBO Council. The HBO Council, universities and a number of employers' organisations are part of its Board. The task of the DVC is to promote national and international recognition of post-initial higher education programmes. This is done by establishing the quality and the required master's level. The council is concerned with recognising civil effect to positively validated programmes.

The Dutch Validation Council executes validation at request of the programme by means of a specific system. Independent expert panels establish the level and quality of the programme through specially developed procedures and instruments. If the result is positive, the Dutch Validation Council grants the programme the right to confer master's titles for a maximum period of four years. In future, DVC's activities will be integrated in the NAO system.

Certiked (Stichting Certificatie Kennisintensieve Dienstverlening). This organisation is specialised in quality management for knowledge-intensive service-oriented organisations and institutions. It issues certificates for covering international recognised standards such as ISO-9000, or other models such as EFQM, as well as specific professional requirements. *Certiked* is one of the candidates for a quality agency.

15.3 System Dynamics

15.3.1 Driving Forces and Social Problems

There have been some continuous themes behind decision-making in Dutch higher education regarding quality. One has been the balance between accountability and autonomy: reduction of ex ante regulation if higher education institutions showed they made good use of their greater autonomy. This has been part of government rhetoric since the early 1980s and a prime driver for the introduction of quality assessment.

This was accompanied by some doubt as to the suitability of higher education graduates (especially from universities) for the labour market. This is also linked to the efforts of the government to tighten the links between universities and their (economic) environment. In these efforts, quality assessment has been only one of the policy instruments next to funding for projects, incubators, etc. For the HBO colleges, this linking has been part of their mission from the outset.

Another major underlying driver for quality-related policies in the Netherlands – although in contrast with the previous element – has been what we would like to call a ‘small country complex’. By that, we mean the conviction on the part of decision-makers that the high quality of Dutch higher education was not sufficiently recognised abroad because of our ‘minority’ language and our degree structure, which was not easily comparable with the degrees of other countries. This led to the readiness of the Dutch government to adopt innovative policy instruments that could show the Dutch quality standards to the outside world, and more especially its readiness to engage in international projects. It was the Dutch government, when it presided over the European Union in 1992, that introduced the issue of quality assurance on the European agenda. And it has been a pioneer in initiating or joining European projects ever since, including the recent ‘Joint Quality Initiative’, together with the Flemish government. Yet the major example of this driver is, of course, the way in which the Netherlands responded to the Bologna Declaration: it was among the first countries to restructure its degree and its well-established quality assurance systems.

The ‘bottom-line’ of policy is of course the costs of higher education. Cost containment has been a major concern for Dutch governments since 1977, when it was a major issue in the national elections. In relation to higher education, major budget cuts were made *before* quality assessment was introduced, as mentioned above. There was a conscious attempt in the mid-1980s to disassociate quality judgements and budget cuts, unlike the developments in the UK at the time. Nevertheless, continuous ‘rationalisations’ and per student budget reductions (taking inflation and the growing number of students into account) have created a threatening environment for Dutch higher education over the last two decades. Because of this financial context and stimuli from the ministry of education to engage in entrepreneurial activities, international trade in higher education (i.e. attracting foreign, non-EU students) has become one of the ways in which higher education institutions have tried to supplement their budget. Better international recognition was therefore of interest to the entrepreneurial higher education institutions as well: accreditation and well-known degree names could mean USPs (Unique Selling Points) for them.

15.3.2 Relationships among Schemes

The policy instrument ‘landscape’ in the Netherlands is becoming very simple: all major evaluation and approval schemes are now integrated under the NAO.

15.3.3 Consequences for the Higher Education System

We shall have to wait to see the consequences of moving to an accreditation system; yet it is clear that in the transition period there is much uncertainty at all levels. Who

will be accredited, who will not? There has been talk during the preparation of NAO that 5 to 10 % of the requests must lead to non-accreditation to show that the danger was real: will this – if it comes true – affect the private sector only, or also public higher education institutions? What will the Minister of Education do if programmes that are vital for other policy goals are not accredited? (For instance: there is a severe shortage of teachers; would non-accredited teacher training programmes really be closed down?) Furthermore, how will the general standards framework of NAO be elaborated into quality agencies' checklists? Will the quality agencies be able to pay some attention to quality improvement – as promised in all policy statements – faced with the consequences of non-accreditation?

Students too are uncertain. In their talks with the NAO, they stressed control, especially control of quality of delivery. For them, as mentioned before, consequences will include eligibility for government student support. Students' options will be enlarged by the new accreditation system, as private higher education providers will be included in it on an equal footing, giving the same rights to government support. Whether this will lead to more quality-related choice of study programmes for students entering the higher education system (or re-entering it, e.g., at the master's level) is another issue worth studying in years to come.

For external stakeholders, the change to an accreditation system promises greater transparency of quality judgements, which until now were written for an audience of insiders – hence the market for magazines ranking the higher education institutions. In fact, employers' demands for more transparency were one of the drivers behind the HBO Council's pilot accreditation project.

Quite a different matter – which will have to be discovered in practice too – is whether the system of accrediting each programme separately will be sustainable. There are already some signs that reduction of effort is aimed at, e.g., some aspects common to a number of programmes in a single higher education institution could be checked through a 'lighter' mechanism.

15.4 Influence of Bologna and European Models

As mentioned in the previous section, the Bologna process has been taken up in the Netherlands as a major driver for higher education system change. The Bologna aims of international transparency and mobility within Europe and across the world were welcomed by Dutch policy-makers. The former has been mentioned as a first main driver of quality policy in the last two decades in the Netherlands. The latter was also mentioned, not so much in the 'friendly', 'co-operative' conception of student mobility or even graduate mobility in the European labour market, but more especially in the 'competitive' framework of attracting foreign, fee-paying students.

With respect to European models, the Netherlands has played the role of a model for other countries since the late 1980s through conscious ‘promotional’ activities by representatives of the Dutch quality assessment agencies. With the change to accreditation, the German case was used as a model for the development of the NAO (the example certainly was not followed slavishly, but discussions took place between representatives of NAO and the German Accreditation Council bureau).

The example of NAO and other elements of Dutch conceptions of quality (such as the preference for output quality, i.e. competences of graduates) were used in the wider European debate to set examples for other European countries, e.g., in the Joint Quality Initiative (JQI).

15.5 Individual Level Assessments

With the deregulation and privatisation movement of the 1980s and 1990s, the higher education institutions became independent employers in some respects (for more information see the parallel Enders & De Weert report). For the academic staff, this implied a move away from prescribed amounts of teaching or research hours per year, but also a move away from the seniority principle, i.e. automatic annual salary increases. Instead, individual performance was given some importance in higher education institutions’ human resource management (although that term was not used until recently). A main element here was the ‘individual functioning talks’ in the framework of staff appraisal schemes, which were to take place annually between teaching staff and their immediate superiors: in universities, lower-level teachers with their professor, professors with their dean, etc. These talks were not only meant to influence salary increases, but also to introduce career development into the higher education institutions, e.g. through teaching and research portfolios. However, these changes are still in their infancy; as De Weert reported in the parallel project report just referred to, committees have been at work and proposals have been made, but the old rules and regulations still apply. But with a new round of central negotiations coming up, the situation may change soon.

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