Quality of higher education

The government believes it is important that the quality of higher education is not only guaranteed but also continuously improved. The educational institutions and their programs are primarily responsible for this, but the government also takes care of this. The most important government instrument for external quality assurance in higher education is the accreditation system.

Responsible bodies

Higher education institutions are responsible for the quality of the education that they provide. The Minister of Education, Culture and Science is responsible for the quality of education at system level. Supervision of higher education is regulated in the Higher Education and Research Act (WHW) and in the Educational Inspection Act (WOT). Supervision plays an important role for the Netherlands-Flanders Accreditation Organisation (NVAO) and the Education Inspectorate. Within the educational institutions, the employee participation bodies, including students, and the supervisory board usually also play a role in monitoring quality.

Quality

The quality of education is monitored by the government with the accreditation system. Accreditation is a hallmark of the government that expresses that the quality of education has been positively assessed by the NVAO. The NVAO determines this on the basis of an independent and expert peer review. The purpose of the accreditation system is to guarantee the quality of higher education, so that students, employers and other social actors can count on the quality of education to be in order. Important legal consequences are attached to accreditation: if a program is accredited, the institution is entitled to grant a degree. The accreditation also applies as a necessary condition for granting student finance to students and for the funding of institutions.

Teaching and examination regulations

The government lays down the framework for education, within which institutions must operate. The elaboration of education in the Teaching and Examination Regulations (OER) is the responsibility of the administration of the higher education institutions. In the OER, the syllabus, the specializations, the content and the layout of the various examinations are recorded for each program affiliated to the institution. For each program or group of programs, the OER provides information about the syllabus, its quality, examinations and final examinations.

Approaches and Methods for Quality Assurance

External evaluation in higher education
Under the Higher Education and Research Act (WHW 1993), the task of supervising higher education falls to the Education Inspectorate, under the authority of the Minister of Education, Culture and Science. The Inspectorate supervises both individual institutions and the system as a whole, including the system of accreditation.

**Tasks of the Inspectorate**

1. The Inspectorate evaluates and promotes the quality of the higher education system as a whole, and reports its findings in thematic reports, its annual Education Report and in sectoral reports.
2. The Inspectorate evaluates and promotes the quality of the Dutch system of accreditation. It does not oversee the NVAO, but rather monitors the functioning of the accreditation system in the Netherlands on the basis of a separate inspection framework.
3. The Inspectorate assesses and promotes financial regularity, efficiency and continuity at higher education institutions funded by the government.
4. The Inspectorate may carry out extra inspections at individual institutions in response to serious complaints or signals it has received. Although the Inspectorate does not deal with complaints, they can be a signal of insufficient quality or poor compliance with legislation at the institution in question. Signals about possible shortcomings may also arise during inspection of the higher education system.
5. The Inspectorate advises the Minister on applications from legal entities seeking to join the system of recognised higher education.

The Inspectorate supervises higher education institutions’ compliance with legislation, especially with regard to:

- registration, admission and information;
- teaching and examination regulations;
- study load;
- examination procedure and award of degrees;
- quality assurance and governance;
- participation in decision-making, and legal protection;
- annual reporting by government-funded and non-government-funded institutions.

Generally, the Inspectorate focuses on a particular aspect of the law or conducts a check of compliance at a particular institution, for instance in response to signals of repeated violations of the law. The Inspectorate also examines the way in which the executive board and supervisory board ensure compliance with legislation.

**Cooperation between the Inspectorate and the NVAO**

The Education Inspectorate and the NVAO have agreed on a cooperation protocol to create a structured, effective and coherent system of external supervision and quality assurance for the higher education sector. The protocol sets out how the two bodies work together in carrying out their statutory tasks.

The Inspectorate monitors higher education institutions’ compliance with legislation, financial regularity and continuity, as well as the quality of the higher education system as a whole. The NVAO is responsible for assessing the quality of individual programmes and quality assurance at higher education institutions. The competence to investigate the quality of teaching is vested exclusively in the NVAO.

The NVAO may initiate an investigation in cases where the quality of a course or programme is at risk.
If an institution appears to not fully comply with legislation, it is the Inspectorate that launches an investigation. Thanks to this protocol, the NVAO’s and the Inspectorate’s investigations are complementary, thus preventing duplication of efforts or inspections.

In the Netherlands the NVAO assesses programmes at government-funded higher education institutions (universities and institutions of higher professional education) and recognised private institutions. All accredited higher education programmes and courses in the Netherlands can be found in an official register, the Central Register of Higher Education Study Programmes (CROHO [3]; only available in Dutch). The NVAO maintains a database of all accreditation decisions and the assessment report of every accredited programme.

**Accreditation**

An accreditation system was introduced in the Netherlands in 2003. Accreditation is a hallmark of the government that expresses that the quality of education has been positively assessed by the NVAO. Every study programme in Dutch higher education is assessed every six years by a committee of external and independent experts for the purpose of quality assurance: securing and improving education. The result of the peer review serves as a basis for granting or maintaining accreditation. Partially different legal requirements apply to the accreditation of new programs than existing programs. In all cases, the NVAO validates the committee's assessment and is responsible for determining whether the degree program is (still) accreditation-worthy.

A similar procedure applies to the institutional quality assurance audit (ITK), in which the internal quality assurance of the institution as a whole is assessed. Institutions can apply for ITK recognition on a voluntary basis. A positive assessment at the ITK entitles to a more limited assessment in the accreditation of the programme.

The procedures and criteria for assessing quality and quality assurance are laid down in a nationally valid assessment framework of NVAO [4].

For the purpose of accreditation, a programme is assessed for at least the following quality aspects:

- Intended attainment level
- Teaching learning environment
- Teacher quality
- Assessment and examination
- Realized attainment level

**European cooperation**

The Dutch Minister of Education, Culture and Science has committed to European principles for quality assurance in higher education. These are laid down in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance or Higher Education in the European Higher Education Area (ESG [5]). The Dutch system of quality assurance meets the requirements set by the ESG.

The Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science is a governmental member of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR [6]). The EQAR is a register of agencies that review the quality of higher education institutions according to European standards. The NVAO is included in this register.

The NVAO is a member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA [7]) – an umbrella organisation which represents its members at the European level and internationally, especially in political decision-making processes and in relation to stakeholder
organisations. ENQA aims to maintain high quality standards in European higher education, and boost this quality where necessary.

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