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Short bio Axel Aerden

Axel Aerden is Coordinator of Quality Assurance Flanders at the Accreditation Organisation of The Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) and has 17 years of experience in internal and external quality assurance. He designs quality assurance models and contributes to internationalisation topics from a quality assurance perspective. He coordinates the Certificate for Quality in Internationalisation (CeQuInt), a European-wide approach to assess the quality of internationalisation at programme and institutional level, on behalf of the European Consortium for Accreditation. Axel has specific expertise in the quality assurance of joint programmes and the design and assessment of learning outcomes. Before joining NVAO, Axel contributed to policy-making at various levels of higher education: university, national representative association, European member organisation, and as adviser to the Minister of Education.

Short bio Roxanne Figueroa Arriagada

Roxanne Figueroa Arriagada is Board Member of the Ghent Student Union. She is responsible for educational issues and policy. She furthermore represents the Flemish Union of Students (VVS) and thus the student voice in the Flemish Education Council (VLOR), the official advisory body on educational issues in Flanders. In addition, Roxanne is in her final year at Ghent University, majoring in Educational Sociology.

Short bio Ann Verreth

Ann Verreth is the vice-chair of the executive board of the Accreditation Organisation of The Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO). Before joining NVAO, she was deputy chief of staff at the cabinet of the minister of education. Her work experience is mainly in the field of (higher) education policy: applied research at HIVA-Leuven, policy advisor of the ACW-workers organisation, deputy chief of staff and chief of staff of different ministerial cabinets, and secretary-general of the Flemish Council of University Colleges (VLHORA). At that moment VLHORA was also a regular QA agency and ENQA member. Her familiarity with quality assurance and higher education also through other activities. Ann holds a Master's degree in Political Sciences from the University of Leuven and a Teacher Degree.

Short bio Kristian Versluys

Kristiaan Versluys is Director of Education of Ghent University (Belgium). He is responsible for the general educational policy of the university as well as for quality



assurance, counselling services, registration procedures, curriculum development, and rules and regulations.

Versluys obtained a doctorate in Comparative Literature from Harvard University in 1979. As professor of American literature and culture, he published a study on city poetry and some sixty scholarly (book) articles in international journals and collections. His book-length study *Out of the Blue. September 11 and the novel* was published by Columbia University Press in August 2009. His specialties are urban literature (especially the literature of New York) and Jewish-American fiction.

Versluys was a Fellow at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies in 2004-2005. From 1989 to 2008 he was a regular guest professor at Columbia University. In 2001 he was elected as a member of the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium.

Proposal

Title: NVAO's Appreciative Approach, a new philosophy to strengthen internal and external quality assurance

Abstract (150 words max):

When implementing a new QA system in 2014, NVAO conceived the Appreciative Approach as the underpinning philosophy of its new QA methodology. Previous QA methodologies were primarily compliance-led, always starting from normative standards. The Appreciative Approach has shifted the focus from the standards towards the context of the assessment. It takes this context as the starting point and in this context works towards standards. Implementing the Appreciative Approach has had several consequences for all aspects of QA procedures, e.g. for the role of institutions, for the mindset of all involved, for the organisation of the site visits, for the training of panel members, for the involvement of students, and for the format of the assessment reports. The new QA system cultivates institutional autonomy while also engaging institutions more. Their new responsibilities have direct consequences on QA within higher education institutions and for the way students are engaged.

The paper is based on: practice

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? If yes, give details. NO.



Text of paper (3000 words max):

Introduction

In 2014, NVAO proposed to replace the current system of programme accreditation by a comprehensive institutional review. At the same time, NVAO totally rethought the underlying methodology of quality assurance (QA) for universities and university colleges and developed what it now refers to as the Appreciative Approach. This should not be regarded as NVAO's new QA system. The Appreciative Approach is in fact the underpinning philosophy of NVAO's newly developed QA methodology. As such, it guides NVAO's mindset in developing new processes and procedures and strongly communicates the way NVAO cultivates institutional autonomy.

Background

After almost three decades of programme assessments, the spectre of accreditation fatigue haunted universities and university colleges (U&UCs) in Flanders. While other higher education (HE) providers regarded programme accreditation as a new phenomenon, some programmes at U&UCs were preparing to undergo their sixth external assessment. These programmes' accreditation fatigue came coupled with the feeling among U&UCs that they lacked ownership over quality and QA. In addition, NVAO was aware that the persistent administrative burden brought an ever-diminishing added value to the institutions' educational policy and the programmes' quality. Programme accreditation, however, had also created a climate of trust among all stakeholders in HE institutions. This climate facilitated the introduction of the comprehensive institutional review.

The comprehensive institutional review

The comprehensive review focuses on two distinct aspects: (1) the quality of the institution's educational policy and (2) the institution's conduct of QA at programme level.

An institution's educational policy is assessed in the context of the institution. The assessment starts from the vision on higher education and its quality developed by the institution in response to societal challenges. This part of the review aims at answering whether the institution has adequately implemented its education policy in order to realise its own vision on higher education and to support educational quality.



An institution's conduct of QA at programme level is assessed in the context of actual programmes. The assessment starts with the results and outcomes of the involvement of internal and external stakeholders, and of external and independent peers and experts. This part of the review aims at answering whether the quality of programmes is effectively and authoritatively assured.

To include actual practice into a comprehensive institutional review, the review panel organises review trails. Horizontal trails focus on the institution-wide realisation of a single theme or topic (e.g. internationalisation). Vertical trails focus on the actual implementation of (aspects of) educational policy in two or more programmes (e.g. active citizenship in the curricula). And, finally, conduct trails focus exclusively on the assurance of programme quality and, in particular, on the conduct of QA at the level of teaching and learning. The panel uses the results and outcomes that are available, such as internal reports, stakeholders reports, feedback by peers, benchmarking exercises, survey outcomes and implementation reports. The trails enable the panel to scrutinize how in actual practice an institution uses these results and outcomes to demonstrate, improve, and enhance a programme's quality.

The Appreciative Approach

Although the shift from programme to institutional level assessment is the most perceptible feature of the reform, it is the introduction of the Appreciative Approach that should be regarded as the seismic shift. The previous approaches used by NVAO were primarily compliance-led. Both the assessment panels and the institutions regarded prescribed standards as the starting point of the review process. As a result, an assessment panel would check whether the programme's model was in compliance with NVAO's standards. As a result, self-evaluation exercises and resulting reports were geared towards demonstrating compliance with NVAO's standards. The compliance-led approach can be regarded as an advanced version of the shape sorting game. In this children's game, a shape fits through a hole of the same shape. The hole is actually a mould or template and shapes are supposed to fit through. When NVAO's standards are regarded as moulds or templates, programme models are shaped in order for them to fit through and gain accreditation. And although the QA system was generally perceived as a system of peer review, the aspect of the peers helping each other improve and enhance their programmes never really achieved its full potential. Experts felt pushed into a 'yes but'-attitude, mainly focusing on the things that were missing or lacking. The actual assessments, then, tended to look for deficiencies and for incidents.



The Appreciative Approach on the other hand can be summarised by its most important characteristics: contextualisation, the postponement of judgments, the focus on strong aspects, the continuous dialogue, and the co-creation of insights. This approach has shifted the focus from standards towards the context of the assessment. It takes an institution's context as the starting point and in this context works towards the standards. In essence, the assessment panel will make no value judgements concerning the educational model chosen by an institution. Instead, it will assess whether this model actually works, from vision to policy and implementation.

The Appreciative Approach can be contrasted with the shape sorting game. An institution does not need to shape itself to fit NVAO's standards. Continuing the children's game analogy, one could say that institutions are free to choose the ball they want, that best suits their particular situation. NVAO will then judge the game the institution plays with that ball. NVAO thus starts from the premise that an institution is uniquely positioned to choose for itself how to shape its educational model. Unless there is a blatant discrepancy between the model chosen and international standards, NVAO will determine whether the model chosen functions or not. As a consequence, if the model does not work, the focus needs to be on the defective execution of the model and not on the model as such.

A changed mindset for panel members

In the Appreciative Approach, panel members are not supposed to hunt down "mistakes". Instead, panel members concentrate on how well the institution's policy leads towards achievements. A 'yes and'-attitude allows the panel to look at the institution from the institution's own perspective and to better identify chances and opportunities. Since this requires a specific mindset, panel members are trained in applying NVAO's Appreciative Approach. They are initiated into the underlying philosophy and apply it in role plays. Here, NVAO gives ample room to discuss how to cultivate an appreciative dialogue and thus overcome the interview-style approach. They also work on phrasing strong and appreciative conversation starters.

Those with previous experience in assessment panels have their perspective shifted: to not think from the standards towards compliance, but to think from the context and vision of the institution towards actual implementation, and to not immediately make intermediate, partial judgements but to first generate all necessary insights before coming to an overall evaluation.



Implementation of the approach

The outline of the core of the institutional review exemplifies the way the appreciative approach has shaped NVAO's procedures. An institution starts this procedure by submitting a critical reflection. This document outlines the institution's educational policy; it is the institution's means to communicate its context and model (vision and implementation). As such it does not need to follow a specific outline or even address NVAO's standards. Members of the review panel read the critical reflection and send NVAO's process coordinator their one-page "first appreciation". In it, they focus on aspects that are successfully implemented, that are deemed successful, and the reasons why this is the case. Panel members can also include questions about aspects they would like to further investigate, especially with regard to actual implementation. This preparation leads up to a first site visit, in which panel members focus on 'success factors', on what is good and why that is the case, without being blind to what could be better. This visit is primarily intended to complete the institution's own narrative. It enables panel members to understand the institution better and to decide on the review trails.

The visit starts with an informal meet-&-greet. Panel members start the day with coffee and croissants, while meeting the people they will talk to throughout the site visit. In this informal setting NVAO's process coordinator very briefly introduces the review and stresses the importance of an open attitude on both sides of the table. The chair of the panel then briefly presents the members of the review panel. While the panel members get an opportunity to mingle, the institution can concisely present how they prepared for this review and the site visit. The goal of this meet-&-greet is to create an open atmosphere and already demonstrate NVAO's intent to shape an appreciative dialogue. It also provides the panel with a first glimpse of the institution's quality culture. The review panel will then sequentially talk with four different groups. Each group consists of a mix of internal and external stakeholders and each dialogue focuses on specific themes in the institution's educational policy. The goal of the mixed groups is to enable a wide-ranging dialogue between all participants and to create a dynamic that is more "authentic" than in homogeneous groups, when categories of people (managers, faculty, staff) are talked to separately. Additionally, a varied group composition enables swift corroboration of actual practice by the panel.

The institutional student union proposes the students who are included in the mixed groups. In addition, the student union organises a meeting or event for the panel. There is no guideline for this part of the programme and student unions are quite creative in



the way they convey their message. By giving the students such a central role, NVAO purports to underline their importance in institutional policies.

When submitting the critical reflection, the institution proposes a few focal themes to discuss with the panel. Two of those are included in the programme. These themes can be largely grouped into two categories: (1) aspects of educational policy that might otherwise come up redundantly in all dialogues or (2) policy aspects the institution considers successful and which require a panel's specific attention and appreciation.

The site visit concludes with a co-creation session. In this session, the representatives of the institution and the panel members share the insights gained after two days.

Previously, institutions would use briefings and debriefings of the people the panel spoke to in order to gain some sense of the direction in which things were going. By putting co-creation as the overall aim of the site visit, NVAO invites institutions to gain insights first-hand. To realise this objective institutional observers are allowed to sit in on each of the dialogues, except the one with the student union. Their task is to act as the memory of the institution throughout the dialogues and to see to it that the institution as a whole learns and profits from the discussions. The first site visit ends with the panel formulating the research questions for the review trails and the conditions under which these questions will need to be answered (e.g. people, programmes, departments, etc.).

The second site visit takes three days and is entirely dedicated to the review trails introduced above. These trails are intended to validate the results of the first site visit and to sample the implementation of the educational policy.

The resulting assessment report reflects on the institution's narrative and achieved coherence in educational policy. It does not start from the standards and thus does not present (objective) findings and (subjective) considerations per standard. The report can be better compared to a research diary. It is a linear record of the panel's research activities starting from the receipt of the institution's critical reflection leading up to the panel's final insights and assessment decisions for each of the four standards set in the institutional review framework. The report therefore outlines the panel's various research tracks and interim insights. The report will, of course, still identify where improvement is required and enhancement is possible.

An institutional perspective

Although very much wished for by the institutions, the new QA system caused a veritable shock wave. Programmes that had been externally assessed three times or more before gained little benefit from yet another cycle of assessments. Routine was setting in and



with it a certain lassitude. But routine also provides the comfort of the tried and tested. That sense of security was unexpectedly ruptured when institutions found themselves – virtually clueless - in the terra incognita of a comprehensive institutional review. The result was a flurry of activity, a boost to the system. NVAO's new QA system allowed for experimentation and try-outs. Such freedom entails also a special responsibility. How to design an internal QA system that allows the central authorities of the institutions to monitor their programmes – numbering 200 or more in the bigger institutions – while not choking grassroots efforts and initiatives? How to define a policy that is comprehensive for the whole university and yet leaves enough leeway for the significant differences among programmes widely ranging from nuclear physics to archaeology, from law to medicine?

The first necessity that presented itself was the task of self-definition. As a first step in the institutional review procedure NVAO demanded a critical self-reflection. Mission statements – usually too summary to build a whole QA system upon - were trotted out, reviewed and above all complemented by new documents laying down the essential nature of the institution. Such a process of intense self-scrutiny required strategic thinking and university-wide consultations on an unprecedented scale. Typically, as a corollary of wide-ranging discussions, institutions hammered out strategic goals that represent the bone and marrow of the institution and at the same time provide guidelines for the future. Implicitly or explicitly these goals are inserted in a PDCA-cycle that includes policy issues and quality markers at the level of the programme, the faculty and the whole institution. The big advantage of the new regime over the old is that is internally driven. While the NVAO watches over the efficacy of the system, the institution has the awesome liberty to shape the system itself and adapt it to its own profile and proclivities. This is the case a fortiori when it comes to devising a QA system in the strict sense of the term. Here many new opportunities arise to share good practices and for programme directors to learn from each other. The whole process thrusts upon the individual institution the duty to find and remedy its own deficiencies, but also – and most emphatically so - to capitalize on its own strengths and maximize its own possibilities.

The student perspective

The switch to an internally driven quality “control” also has implications for students and their representatives. After all, students are the main stakeholders in higher education and the effects of a watershed transition are felt by them first and foremost. It is



therefore no surprise that, when it was announced that universities and university colleges would no longer be subject to a regime of programme accreditation, student representatives were alarmed and raised a number of issues concerning the adequacy of the new system. First off, if institutions of higher education were to become self-assessing, how could the truthfulness of these assessments be guaranteed? Furthermore, in case of an actual truthful system of quality control, how to ensure that all of the resulting information is published in a manner easily accessible to students? Thirdly, how would the students' voice be heard in a clear way?

In the previous system, the mere prospect of an upcoming visit by a panel of experts automatically prompted a drive for improvement. Institutions were keen to see their education score high on performance indicators and were therefore willing to invest in courses and programmes, especially in those that had had poor student evaluations in the past. To counter the idea that external control was the only objective way of achieving a truthful and genuine assessment, NVAO made sure that in each self-assessment system, mechanisms were imbedded not only to focus on the strengths of the programmes, but also to bring to light possible weaknesses and to correct them. The second issue follows from the first: after a self-assessment has been made, it is of the utmost importance that the results are reported in a straightforward, honest and verifiable manner. Institutions might be inclined to minimize faults by focussing on their strengths. For that reason, student representatives emphasize the importance of transparent communication. Clear agreements between the institutions and the NVAO should prevent that the public information consists of a set of facts carefully selected by the institution itself, leading to the concealment of negative findings. The NVAO's ruling that every institution should not only publish their strong suits, but also define a number of remedial actions in each programme resolved the second issue raised by the students. The third issue is of a more complex nature. Since 2004, institutions have the legal obligation to hear the students' voice in all important student-related matters. However, the way student participation is institutionalized was left open and thus up to each institution to realise. This creates a situation in which the degree of student involvement greatly varies from institution to institution. In some institutions the contribution of students is greatly valued, in some it is valued less. However that may be, the new QA system brings about new duties and responsibilities. For that reason, it is imperative that institutions provide the necessary facilities that make it possible to combine study with student representation.



Conclusion

In a relatively short period, Flanders remodelled its QA system. Simultaneously, NVAO developed the Appreciative Approach as the underpinning philosophy for its QA methodology. Its impact has been positive but in part also unforeseen. Institutions now also use the Appreciative Approach in their own internal QA systems. And all these momentous changes are carefully monitored. When the current phase of institutional reviews ends in the autumn of 2017, a thorough overall evaluation will be published. This evaluation will inspire the design of the next external QA system. The intended outcome is a complete mind shift affecting all partners, with the ultimate aim of a strengthened and demonstrable quality culture in Flemish higher education.

Discussion questions:

- Could the Appreciative Approach bring added value to the overall issue and strengthening of quality culture?
- How can an institutional assessment grasp the quality culture of that institution?
- Is the new Flemish QA system in compliance with the ESG?
- Which information should institutions publish about the quality of their programmes? Which information is important for students and employers?

References :

NVAO, Framework for institutional reviews-Flanders 2015-2017, March 2015.

NVAO, Quality Code – Flanders, 2015