

Overview report on the institutional reviews

*The quality of the educational
policies at the Flemish
universities and university
colleges*

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1 Introduction

After three decades of accreditation at the programme level, the added value that it generated in stimulating the quality of education proved to be no longer in proportion to the efforts that this approach required. In this context - and also in the context of financial savings - NVAO was looking for an approach in which institutions were granted more ownership and autonomy in the processes of quality assurance. The aim was to develop a review procedure that better fitted the context of the individual institution and at the same time provided added value for the institution.

The Flemish quality assurance system for higher education is based on trust and dialogue. The ownership lies primarily with the higher education community as a whole. The system consists of assessments at the programme level and, on the other hand, institutional reviews. The eighteen universities and university colleges (appendix 1) were subjected to an institutional review in the period 2015-2017. This first round of institutional reviews was a baseline measurement and tested the quality of the educational policy of an institution. This review was based on four standards reflecting the PDCA cycle. A review panel appointed by NVAO essentially looked at:

- the institution's vision on the quality of its education and the policy that results from this vision;
- the implementation and realization of that policy with special attention for enhancing the quality of education;
- the continuous evaluation and monitoring of the implementation of the educational policy and its outcomes;
- the institution's ability to make adjustments where necessary and to improve the realization of its strategic goals.

In all these aspects, shaping and stimulating a quality culture was considered to be of great significance.

For the institutional review, NVAO developed the Appreciative Approach. In this approach the context of the institution and the educational policy model chosen by the institution were the starting point. It was therefore not judged whether the chosen policy model was "good", but whether it worked. In this way, the system appreciates the autonomy of the institutions, the efforts in quality assurance of recent decades and the responsibility that institutions have taken in this respect.

Based on the results of the programme assessments from the past, NVAO gained confidence that institutions could be made responsible for ensuring the quality of education themselves. NVAO therefore strongly advocated to supplement the institutional reviews with a pilot in which the institutions put in place a conduct of the quality assurance of programmes. Institutions that went for the optional pilot, in what was called the "extensive institutional review", were granted a perpetuation of the accreditation period for their programmes. However, the obligation for a programme assessment and accreditation was maintained for newly recognized programmes, programmes with an accreditation with limited validity (programmes going through an improvement period), and joint programmes that were considered to be accredited on the basis of the selection in accordance with the stipulations of a European funding scheme.

The review panel looked into the institution's achievements from the perspective from the institution on the conduct of the quality assurance of programmes. The panel particularly focused on the possibilities that the conduct could offer and how the benefits could be optimized. During this review, special attention was paid to the involvement of stakeholders and peers, the results and outcomes of the conduct pilot



and the institution's plans to make information on the quality of education publicly accessible.

Accountability and improvement are two key concepts in NVAO's quality assurance procedures. Accountability refers to transparent and public information about quality, always respecting the autonomy of the institution. Continuous development and improvement of educational quality is achieved by focusing on a proper quality culture in each institution and attention to compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

2 Justification

This overview report summarizes the general findings that resulted from the institutional reviews carried out at all Flemish universities and university colleges between November 2015 and May 2017. In this institutional review, the quality of the education policy (model) is assessed by an independent review panel (further: the panel) on the basis of NVAO's *Framework for Institutional Reviews - Flanders 2015-2017*. The institutions were given the opportunity to carry out, in combination with the institutional review, a conduct on the quality assurance of programmes. The *Quality Code - Flanders 2015-2017* defines the general principles for the conduct and how institutions are accountable. Each panel, in addition to its assessment in the context of the institutional review, also advised on the conduct developed by the institution.

The overview report is aimed at a broad audience and outlines a general image in which the findings of the panels of all institutional reviews are discussed thematically and in coherence. In addition to this report, an evaluation report and an advisory report is available for each institution.

The evaluation report is the outcome of the assessment of the quality of the educational policy. Panels do not review the administrative or management model of the institution as such, but whether the chosen model works. This report has been written in such a way that it is primarily addressed to the institution in order to give back the story about its educational policy that has been adopted in dialogue with the panel. The purpose of the report is to create added value for the institution in the light of continuous quality improvement. The evaluation report consists of a linear report of the research in which the panel gradually gains more insight in the model of the institution. During the institutional review, the panel investigates several pathways that, after weighing the whole of the findings, evolve into a final judgment.

The advisory report offers an advice on the way the institution is in charge of the quality of its programmes. It is mainly about the conduct of the quality assurance of the programmes as described in NVAO's *Quality Code - Flanders 2015-2017*. The advice is aimed at bringing the institution's conduct to a higher maturity level.

2.1 Composition of panels

The reviews are done by panels composed and appointed by NVAO. The composition of the different panels was published on NVAO's website and is attached to this report. Each panel was composed in the same way and consisted of five members who were assisted by a process coordinator from NVAO and an external secretary.

The *chairman of the panel* was always Flemish with extensive knowledge of the Flemish higher education system and administrative experience. In addition, there was always a *Dutch-speaking panel member from the French Community of Belgium* and a *Dutch panel member*, both with administrative experience in higher education to include expertise in higher education from outside Flanders. Each panel also had a *member from the professional field* that is an expert in quality assurance and quality control in a non-educational context. Finally, each panel was completed with a *student* who was selected by the Vlaamse Vereniging van Studenten (VVS).

Each panel thus had a thorough knowledge of (Flemish) higher education, insight into international quality requirements, administrative experience and a clear educational and audit expertise. In the composition of panels, the background of the panel members and the context of the institution to be assessed were taken into account as much as possible. NVAO also tried to monitor gender equilibrium. The availability of the institution and the agenda of the panel were, of course, determining factors in the final composition of the panels.

Prior to their task all panel members, secretaries and process coordinators participated in a training session. The purpose was to instruct the panel members on their role and on the new framework for institutional reviews. In addition, the panel was actively trained to apply the Appreciative Approach, which NVAO has developed in the run-up to the institutional reviews.

2.2 Procedure of the panels

Each panel has visited its institution twice. Prior to the visits, the panel members formed a first impression on the basis of the critical reflection, in which the institution approaches its educational vision and policy, policy implementation, monitoring and improvement policy in a self-critical way. A first two-day visit was exploratory in nature and was intended to clarify the institution's story as presented in the critical reflection. The panels held discussions with (representatives of) the institutional management and with all stakeholders: teachers and staff, students and professional field.

Through discussions on two focus themes, strengths or particularities in the profile of the institution could be highlighted. During the entire first visit, the institutions had the opportunity to use observers who acted as the memory of the institution when – at the end of the second day – panel and institutions agreed on common insights in a round table discussion. The vast majority of the institutions made use of this opportunity. In a second, two- or three-day visit, the panel set up a research on specific elements of the educational policy and quality assurance of the institution by means of a number of targeted review trails. Horizontal trails focused on a facet of the educational policy that was investigated institution-wide, vertical trails looked to the rollout of (a part of) the educational policy model in two or more programmes. The third review trail targeted the conduct used by the institution to assure the quality of the programmes. This trail formed the basis for the separate advisory report.

2.3 Reports and decision making

After the panels delivered their evaluation and advisory reports to NVAO, a cluster analysis was carried out per cluster of six institutions. Each report was analyzed by two critical readers from NVAO's project team regarding the equitable substantiation of the judgments and the underpinning of the panel's investigation. Where needed, adjustments to the reports were suggested to the panel, that stays responsible for the reports at all time. After the cluster analysis, the institutions received an oral feedback on the findings and judgments of the panel by NVAO's coordinator of the Flemish quality assurance system and the process coordinator involved in the review. The panel was not directly involved at this occasion to maximize consistency and to keep planning simple. At the request of the institutions, decision-making by NVAO's board and publication of reports and decisions were postponed until completion of all institutional reviews. NVAO's Executive Board decided on the outcome of the procedures on July 3, 2017, the General Board on August 21, 2017. The closing meeting on September 11, 2017 makes all results public.

2.4 Evaluation of the quality assurance system

The experience with the institutional reviews and, more generally, with the Flemish quality assurance system are the subject of an evaluation imposed by law. To this end, an Evaluation Group and a Resonance Group were established. The information for this evaluation was collected through a 360° query taken from all concerned: panel members, secretaries, process coordinators and representatives of internal and external stakeholders of the institutions. Also the accreditation procedures for programmes that have been subjected to an assessment procedure since the summer of 2014 have been included in the evaluation. The information gathered, together with information from additional focus groups with institutions and panels, and this overview

report based on the analysis of the reports, contributes to the evaluation of the entire quality assurance system in the autumn of 2017.

3 Reporting of findings and considerations

3.1 Institutional level vs. programme level: educational vision, educational policy and conduct

The institutional reviews show that all universities and university colleges have a broad-based educational vision and subsequent educational policy. This is often translated into a number of strategic goals for the current policy period. In some institutions, a new policy plan is being developed or has been developed recently or strategic goals were revised. Panels in this case assessed the current policy, but also looked forward to the future policy plan with the institution. Often, newly developed policies gave a good view of the remedial capacities of the institution (standard 4 of the *Framework for Institutional Reviews - Flanders 2015-2017*).

Educational policy and strategic policy objectives are developed at the institutional level, and it appears that input that is provided from the lower level is integrated as much as possible. The policy takes into account the core business of the institutions, including education, research, social services and for some also development and practice of the arts. In addition, the institutional reviews make it clear that the institutions actively respond to social challenges and the regional context, and that this adds up to a specific profile of the institutions. Examples of this are the metropolitan context, the influx of students with a language disadvantage or the large number of foreign students.

Obviously, educational policy is closely linked to the quality of education. The transposition of strategic objectives to the programme level is aimed at providing high-quality education. The way this translation is effected differs among institutions. In a number of institutions, frameworks, protocols or guidelines are provided that determine what minimally needs to be achieved in each programme. Other institutions use as much as possible the principle of subsidiarity and allow programmes or intermediate levels (faculties, departments, study areas...) to determine which of the strategic objectives they want to prioritize in their own context, while providing at the same time the necessary support through guidelines and frameworks. The division between both methods is not strict and the establishment of minimum standards does not exclude a large autonomy at the lower level. The institutions are positioned in a continuum between centrally-directed and decentralized autonomous educational policies.

For the panels evaluating an institution, it is crucial to determine how the institutional management or central level succeeds in translating the central educational policy into the programmes and in achieving that all strategic objectives get sufficient attention when the whole of the institution is considered. They do this in various ways, including through consultation platforms, liaison officers (specialized in education and quality control) who are in touch with the central level and are working at the lower level, queries and business intelligence tools. Also the own conduct of securing the quality of education already proves to be a way to follow up the implementation of the educational policy at the low level. Hence, there might be a partial overlap between standards 3 and 4 of the *Framework for Institutional Reviews - Flanders 2015-2017* which are reviewed by panels in the evaluation report on the one hand, and the development of a proper conduct on which the panels drew up a separate advisory report.

3.2 Social challenges and strategic goals

The institutional reviews make it clear that universities and university colleges meet their current educational challenges through their educational vision. To do so, institutions define their own strategic goals that fit their own context in the best possible way.

Diversity in all its facets is high on the agenda of the universities and university colleges. Regarding diversity, the institutions are faced with a multitude of challenges. The democratization and flexibilization of higher education has led to increased diversity - and hence heterogeneity - in the student population. The proportion of students with a migration background is on the rise. Students with disabilities, athletes and artists can adapt their studies to their personal situation. In the context of lifelong learning, the number of working students increases as well. More and more students make use of the status of student entrepreneur.

Most institutions integrate diversity or inclusiveness under one form or another in their strategic goals. Policy-based actions include, for example, tailored courses for students with language difficulties, projects where students are involved with children with migration background, specific recruitment initiatives in secondary schools for pupils from disadvantaged groups, intake counseling and rapid reorientation. Flexible trajectories were developed that respond to specific needs to prevent dropout or to maintain study efficiency.

There is not only attention for students who are experiencing difficulties. On the other side of the spectrum, excellent students are challenged. The institutions stimulate the talents of their students in different ways, for example, by means of honours programmes in which the best students can develop their talents to the maximum, or through specific entrepreneurship trajectories. Recognizing and acknowledging talents is a must for students as well as their teachers in order to be able to work student-oriented.

Tailored tutoring is seen as the key to success and, like talent development, can often be encountered as one of the strategic goals.

ICT in education and the successful integration of different learning methods (blended learning) are important ways to create a diverse context in the teaching environment as well, from which everyone can benefit.

However, attention to diversity is not limited to the student population. Certain disadvantaged groups benefit from the proximity of role models, and the institutions play a role in addressing diversity in their personnel policy.

Globalization poses a different social challenge. The institutions respond to this challenge with strategic goals that concern internationalization, the development of intercultural competencies, promoting international mobility and shaping internationalization@home. English programmes or courses make education accessible to foreign students (and staff) and prepare students for a career in an international context. Through activating, student-centered learning much attention is paid to the development of a whole range of skills, not just subject matter, but also so-called 21st century skills receive considerable attention in the curricula and intended learning outcomes. It concerns, for example, the previously mentioned intercultural competencies, but also communicative skills, entrepreneurship, a critical scientific attitude, self-control, flexibility and resilience, or the ability to perform in a team context.

Universities and university colleges also see their own context as a challenge and strategic goals focus on strengthening the institution within its own context. In their strategic goals, institutions therefore pay attention to building networks, both internationally and regionally. In this way, they can structurally collaborate with similar and/or compatible institutions. Many institutions also aim to act as a motor for the

region and work together with regional partners for fundamental or practice-oriented scientific research or to allow students to get internships as part of their education.

Different university colleges have a strong focus on HBO5, for which the legal frameworks are currently being constructed. They aim to make higher education more accessible to students who do not enter now, or cancel at some point in their study career. In this way, they want to further contribute to the connection between talent and the labor market and thus be a motor for the regional economy.

3.3 Policy support

The panels have found a broad support for the institution's policy within the groups that the panel spoke with during the site visits. Several university colleges have recently found themselves in a fusion context, that only goes back a few years and sometimes still continues. Nevertheless, the panels have been able to conclude that in the years after the fusions, an incredible amount of work has been done, despite the difficult financial situation faced by the university colleges. Where the initial policy soon after the fusion sometimes originated top-down, one can see that afterwards institutional boards allowed space for decentralized autonomy. In most cases, the policy seems to have been achieved by listening closely to the actual reality of daily work in the different programmes, departments, study areas or faculties. The bundling of good initiatives that find their way up and are shared across the boundaries of the disciplines sometimes requires more time, but benefits the overall support. The institutional reviews show that all institutions have found the right balance in developing a central policy that is rooted in initiatives from the lower level.

Nevertheless, the panels state that institutions do not push the subsidiarity to the fullest and do not leave the decentralized units to their fate. Partly due to the high workload that many professors, teachers and programme managers face, they are indeed asking to be directed and supported from the central level. The institutional board directs and monitors the marked path. The panels have found that many institutions employ liaisons officers, which belong to the central supporting services, but work at the lower levels to support the programme specific translation and implementation of the policy. Consultation platforms at study area level or workgroups that transcend faculties, departments and programmes, or even campuses, ensure optimal sharing of knowledge and exchange of good practices. The panels have found that this approach ensures proper alignment and good results.

With the support of the central supporting services, often at programme level, the central policy lines are translated into a strategic plan at the programme level, which is further transformed into operational objectives and actions through annual (action) plans. This annual (action) plans make goals concrete, realistic, measurable and acceptable, and play an important role in the prioritization in the policy at the programme level, but also in monitoring and follow-up (see below).

3.4 Strategic goals

The table below sets out the strategic objectives formulated by institutions. Some are unique, others can be encountered in several institutions. Generally speaking, the panels have found that institutions are paying close attention to employee empowerment, tailor-made student counseling, student participation and a strong regional base, and good cooperation with the professional field.

Selection of strategic goals
A strong quality culture
Activating, innovative education
Active and strong involvement of the professional field
Anticipate and respond to social and socio-economic problems.
Appreciative organization
Attention to the authenticity of education in cooperation with the professional field
Coaching teaching style, improving study progress and tailor-made counseling
Co-creation
Diversity and/or an inclusive approach
Expertise and information sharing
Increase market share through a targeted programme offer
Inspiring, stimulating learning, living and working environment
Internationalization of education
Lifelong learning for graduates
Multidisciplinarity
Professional growth and development of employees
Research university
Self-control and commitment; decentralized autonomy
Strategic networks; a strong regional base and international partners
Student participation; stakeholder involvement
Student-centered approach
Students develop into competent graduates; talent development; attention to employability skills
Sustainability
The institution operates as a performant organization
Working within a metropolitan context

3.5 Focus themes

During the first exploratory site visit, the panels were aiming to gain more knowledge about the institution and its policies. The second day of the visit highlighted and discussed the strengths or success factors of the institution, or particular elements that are characteristic for the institution's profile. These so-called focus themes were chosen by the panel, after reading the critical reflection, but were often recommended by the institution.

The table below gives an overview of the most common focus themes that were selected by the panels. Sometimes three instead of two focus themes were selected or multiple themes from the table were merged into one.

Most common focus themes	Frequency
Activating, authentic and/or student-centered education	4
Diversity	4
Involvement of students, employees and other stakeholders; participation	4
Nexus education-research	4
Links with the region	4
Examination policy, learning outcomes and end level	3
Connection with the professional field	3
Internationalization	3
Tailored counseling, coaching trajectories for students	3
Governance and quality assurance: who is responsible for what	2
Internships of students, orientation towards the professional field, and employability	2
Language policy	2
Practice-oriented scientific research	2
Professionalization of teachers	2
Talent development of students and teachers	2

3.6 Trails

During the second site visit, the panel conducted an in-depth study by means of a couple of well-chosen review trails. Horizontal review trails are thematic trails and focus on a topic, theme, or highlight used by the institution to position itself. The panel attempts to check in one or more trails whether the relevant (aspect of the) policy reaches the desired result institution-wide (in programmes as well as services). In the vertical review trails, the panel has examined in at least two programmes to what extent elements of the vision and policy mentioned in the first standard are actually implemented. To this end, the panel has gone through all the standards in the framework sequentially.

The trails were chosen on the basis of the research questions on the implementation of the educational policy model formulated by the panel at the end of the first site visit. The programmes or services that formed the subject of the trails were determined after consultation with the institution so that relevant conversation groups could be composed. After all, sometimes, when studying a particular facet, the panel was looking for a programme that was exemplary for others; in other cases, the panel would just like to study programmes that still had to tackle some issues, so that any problems encountered by the institution or possible opportunities could be visualized.

The table below lists the most common thematic trails. In most cases, it concerns horizontal trails, in some cases a vertical trail also focused on a specific topic or theme. However, most vertical trails were set up in a more general way and aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the translation of the central educational vision and policy at the programme level and the subsequent implementation, monitoring and follow-up of the policy. Consequently, there was no focus on a specific element of the vision or a particular strategic goal. Sometimes multiple themes from the table below were combined in the research conducted by the panels.

Most common review trails (or sections of trails) by theme	Frequency
Internationalization	6
Diversity	4
Activating, student-centered and competency-oriented education	3
Educational innovation (incl. blended learning, digitization...)	3
Functioning of education/programme committee or programme management team	3
Monitoring and evaluation (general)	3
Monitoring and evaluation of achieved end level, e.g. examination policy	3
Nexus education-research	3
Regional partnerships	3
Balance between top-down control and bottom-up initiative or autonomy	2
Improvement policy	2
Institution identity	2
Personnel policy	2
Practice-oriented scientific research	2
Professionalization/support of teachers	2
Quality assurance cycle and processes	2
Spearhead policy	2
Attention to programme context	1
Staff and student satisfaction	1
Encouraging and organizing the introduction of the external perspective	1
Internships	1
Involvement of external partners in consultative and programme advisory boards	1
Participation	1
Realization of annual (action) plans and multiannual plans	1
Realizing the educational policy through curriculum reform	1
Study progress – study efficiency	1
Talent policy	1
Tutoring	1

3.7 Strengths/success factors

The panel's decision was made on the basis of the entire process, starting with the reading of the critical reflection which was provided by the institution. Prior to the first site visit, each panel member wrote down a short appreciation based on the submitted documentation, always keeping in mind the basic question whether the education model used by the institution is effective or not. In its appreciation the panel named the strengths and success factors that it thought could be recognized in the policy model of the institution. The initial image was confirmed or adjusted during the first site visit, when the panel had the opportunity to engage with the institution on its initial findings. During the second site visit strengths were further deepened, and also issues were discussed when the panel conducted an appreciative but also critical study based on some well-chosen trails.

The table below lists the main strengths and success factors that panels have found across the various institutions.

Main strengths/success factors that were identified
A wide and varied indicator policy/toolkit for monitoring and evaluation
Active and strong involvement of the professional field
An eye for securing improvement actions
Attention to collaborative learning
Autonomy and ownership at the lower level
Autonomy for and trust in employees
Capacity for innovation and/or experiment
Clear, transparent vision
Committed and enthusiastic staff and students
Contribution of external partners in evaluation of the examination policy to monitor the end level and achieved learning outcomes
Deployment of liaison officers for central level-lower level interaction
Large ambitions in terms of quality, a strong quality culture
PDCA cycles are closed at different levels
Programme supporting services rendered by the central level
Quality culture within a structure of formal and informal lines
Strong tutoring and student counseling
Strongly developed student participation; full participation of student council
The institution has a clear understanding of its areas of concern
Vision and policies were implemented in a systematical manner
Wide support for vision and policy

3.8 Concerns leading to recommendations

Strengths at one institution are sometimes areas of concern at another institution. Formulation of policy at institutional level and translating it at the lower levels seems to run smoothly everywhere. Many institutions still need to pay attention to determination of success indicators for (intermediate) follow-up, not only with respect to processes, but also regarding results. Indicators are sometimes difficult to measure and to respond to. Institutions should state explicitly how intermediate follow-up is carried out and on what basis it is decided whether implementation of the policy is successful or in need of adjustment. Passing on (aggregated) information to the higher levels within the institution is not always carried out systematically and also collaborative learning across programme boundaries can sometimes be enhanced.

In institutions where a new policy was set out, the renewal process has started everywhere. The institutional reviews show that faculties, departments and programmes are then able to achieve the policy objectives at their own pace. This ensures peace in the organization and creates confidence. At the same time, the administrative level has to keep a close eye on the matter and has to provide the necessary support. Hereby, institutions can look more explicitly for the right balance between autonomy at the lower level and direction and guidance from the institutional level.

The panel found that students are involved and feel heard in almost all universities and university colleges. They also see the effects of their input. Especially at the programme level, student participation seems to work well. At institutional level, it is more difficult for students and student councils to get the positions that are available for students filled. It is particularly difficult in university colleges where students normally have a shorter academic career and in their final year spend much time to internships or practice. In some institutions, the role of the students in the development of the policy is truly exemplary and one can almost speak of co-governance.

In a system of institutional reviews, the institutional level has, of course, a prominent position. A decentralized institution, where autonomy at the lower level is hold dear, needs time to find support for a centralized approach. The necessary support will only be given gradually.

A large number of institutions is characterized by an informal culture of improvement among the staff, which is part of the overall quality culture. On the other side, panels also ask that the improvement culture is reflected and documented in more formal structures and instruments, in order to be able to identify and tackle structural problems in time.

Although there is increasing emphasis on benchmarking, it appears that the external benchmarking of programme content is often left to the lower levels. The panels recommend that sufficient guidance would be provided from the central level to ensure that a solid external view is structurally embedded and maintained for all programmes. This also affects the conduct on the quality assurance of programmes that institutions are developing (see below).

The table below summarizes the main recommendations. They are not literal recommendations for one or the other institution, but they give a general idea about the recommendations made by the panels. Of course, panels always took into account the specific context of the institution while giving advice.

Main recommendations
Assess effectiveness of the improvement policy
Continue to focus on the work done on professionalization of staff
Elaborate horizontal and vertical communication and governance lines
Fine-tune vision, values and strategic goals
Further development of an alumni association/alumni policy
Give permanent attention to learning networks
Give top-down sufficient guidance on the implementation of strategic goals
Involve still more (independent) experts in the fields
Look for partnerships with other institutions in the region, in Flanders or internationally
Make sure that focus and priorities are set at the programme level
Monitor on an institutional level that all strategic goals are given sufficient attention when priorities can be set on lower levels in the institution
Pay attention to benchmarking more systematically
Pay attention to feasibility of ambitions
Provide feedback on results of monitoring and improvement policies on the short term, internally to higher management levels, but also to all internal and external stakeholders
Reassess the dual role of educational services associates: they are at the same time supposed to provide guidance and make judgments about programmes
Reinforce the role students play for input at the institutional level
Share good practices and improvement actions more systematically to internal and external stakeholders, also in a formal way
Substantiate goals and determine corresponding outcome indicators for (intermediate) follow-up

3.9 Conditions

The *Framework for Institutional Reviews - Flanders 2015-2017* distinguishes between conditions and recommendations. Conditions relate to an element of a standard. Only by meeting this condition, an institution *meets the standard*. If a panel is able to

formulate a condition, an institution receives the judgment *partially meets the standard*. Formulating a condition demands that the panel can unequivocally name what requires attention and within what timeframe the institution must remedy it. If the panel fails to pinpoint what needs to improve, but only feels that the institution can still achieve more, it cannot impose a condition. In the past round of institutional reviews, where institutions often emphasized that they were still in a transitional phase, the precise formulation of conditions becomes tricky. In particular, this applies when a panel favours its confidence in the institution and its policies over the elements that could be improved. When panels determined that institutions did (still) not reach or did not give appropriate attention to intended strategic goals, they always imposed conditions, regardless of the trust that they sometimes had in the outcome and regardless of the sometimes very high degree of appreciation for what had already been realized or developed.

Panels can in the light of the Appreciative Approach never make a statement on *how* an institution should develop. The process coordinators made sure that recommendations and conditions are only limited to determining *what* still could be developed.

Exceptionally, an institution still has some way to go in the substantiation of policy lines that were developed at the central level - although taking account of what is happening at the lower levels. Implementation of policies is then largely left to faculties, departments, study areas or individual staff members, who are by the way, asking for streamlining, direction and guidance from the top. That is why the central level sometimes misses the (complete) overview of what is happening at the lower levels, is not able to provide sufficient support, and cannot ensure that implementation of the policies is occurring as meant to be. Furthermore, the institution risks not being able to react timely when problems arise.

The panels have imposed the necessary conditions to the institutions where deficiencies were identified. It is important to note that this does not mean that there are problems with the quality of education. Often the programme level has sufficient capabilities to monitor the quality and to develop its own policy that at least partly reflects the views and policy of the institution. The measurement tools used to monitor the basic quality, often date from outdated organizational structures (sometimes from before a fusion), but are insufficiently adapted to new policies.

Conditions mainly relate to the following topics

Cooperation with the professional field and/or other partners (e.g. other institutions)

Materialize policy plans, clarify, prioritize and phase to maintain processes manageable and to consolidate initiatives

Participation of students, professional field and/or other stakeholders

Pay attention to refining, validity and responsiveness of monitoring tools to follow up strategic goals at the institutional level

Systematic monitoring and aggregation of data at the institutional level

3.10 Essential elements of education

A system of institutional reviews puts a lot of responsibility and ownership with the institutions. They gain the confidence to assure the quality of education in the programmes themselves. In doing so, they have to pay attention to the essential elements of quality of education: intended and achieved learning outcomes, curriculum, learning environment and assessment. During the institutional review, some of these elements enter the picture more than others. Panels learn, for example, something about the examination policy at the institutional level or the support that is provided

centrally for the development of state-of-the-art curricula that reflect the position of future graduates.

What is much more difficult to see for the panel is the actual effect of centralized frameworks at the programme level. Only in the trails, panels will consider the way that elements from the central policy were translated in the programmes. So it may happen that in one institution a panel assesses the examination policy in a number of programmes, while in the other institution the panel only looks to the general framework of the examination policy at the institutional level. Therefore, it is crucial that the panel gets a good view on how the institution takes full responsibility for safeguarding all the essential elements of the quality of education by means of its own conduct.

After all, the institutional review is carried out according to the principle of peer review. It is not a full review of all the elements, but a judgment by peers of the functioning of the institution. The in-depth investigation should provide sufficient evidence that the organizational model chosen by the institution is effective. Depending on what the institution presents in its profile or in its critical self-reflection, or depending on the conversation topics chosen by the panel, the panel will be shown examples that provide evidence that the policy model of the institution works. Hence, the reports do not give an exhaustive overview of all the elements of the educational policy, and the fact that a particular report does not make a statement on a particular element, does not mean that the institution has not developed policy regarding that element.

3.11 Safeguarding the quality of programmes by means of the own conduct

As stated above, the educational policy is, as well and mainly, oriented towards providing high quality education. Quality control and quality assurance are, therefore, closely connected with it. Quality assurance is defined here as assessing policy actions, processes, procedures, practices and tools through quality control activities; documenting the findings, including strengths and concerns; ensuring that issues are addressed, both reactive to the specific case as proactive for similar future situations; cyclical reporting on it for each programme; and validation of the quality by the institutional board to demonstrate that the quality delivered meets internationally accepted standards.

In all four standards, the *Framework for Institutional Reviews - Flanders 2015-2017* pays specific attention to the aspect of quality culture. Although sometimes difficult to grasp in an objective manner, identifying a quality culture that fits the institution proves to be a key element in assessing the effectiveness of the educational policy. It is about quality made negotiable, about staff members that informally hold each other accountable for quality, and about a noticeable commitment to continuous quality improvement. Commitment, collaboration and dialogue across programmes, departments or faculties, collaborative learning, and transparency are recurring key terms.

The institutional reviews make it clear that there is a growing quality culture in the institutions. This reinforces the idea that institutions are ready to take full responsibility for the quality of education and that the granting of autonomy and ownership in a system of institutional reviews is a proper evolution.

Faculties (universities) or study areas (university colleges) translate general policies to the workplace and pick up signals that they share in centralized working groups to make sure that they are passed on to the higher management level. The intermediate level is considered by the panels to be extremely valuable. Consultation platforms of liaison officers working at the lower level (on quality control, educational innovation, internationalization, research...) ensure the exchange of good practices among the

local units. The interaction between top-down delivery of a reference framework, policies and visions and the bottom-up influence on the policy by sharing what goes on at the lower level, strengthens not only support for the policy but also the quality culture of the institution.

The third review trail that the panels carried out during the second site visit, focuses on the conduct on the quality assurance of programmes. Because in this round of institutional reviews, the conduct run by the institutions was still under development, the panels limited themselves to giving some advice and they did not make any judgments. The panel looked in particular at the first experiences with the roll out of the conduct in some pilot programmes. The panels spoke to a number of people involved in the pilots and based on these conversations and the conduct pilot reports supplied by the institutions, they have tried to expose opportunities and to provide advice on further optimization of the conduct. Important focal points were the involvement of (external) experts and peers, and the institution's plan with regard to public access to information about the quality of programmes.

3.11.1 Variation on a theme

On the one hand, a certain degree of diversity can be observed in the various embodiments of the conduct developed by the institutions. On the other hand, there are also elements that are recurring regularly. For example, annual (action) plans and/or programme portfolios with a clear folder structure often form the basic documents for quality assurance activities at the program level. Very often, their key elements are brought together in long-range plans that are discussed with the central level. In a number of institutions, this occurs by means of management interviews or management reviews. Follow-up is assured by a second management review a few years later in the quality assurance cycle.

The vast majority of institutions include in their conduct some kind of programme evaluation by a (partly) external panel. Herein, each program is assessed against the institution-wide frameworks. In these frameworks, the institutions incorporated NVAO's *Quality Code - Flanders 2015-2017* and the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. In addition, some institutions also make use of a horizontal version of quality assurance, in the form of thematic audits that take place across the entire width of the institution. With those, for each programme and for the service departments, the current state of affairs with regard to a particular theme is examined (e.g. nexus education-research, internationalization, actual implementation of a strategic policy goal like diversity).

3.11.2 Critical mass

The table below shows for each institution how many of the total number of programmes have already been assessed by means of the conduct. There is a distinction made between the number of programmes that had been assessed at the time of the institutional review, the number assessed at the time this overview report was made public (including the previous category), and the number of programmes currently under assessment. The last column shows the number of programmes that has stayed out of the picture so far.

These figures require some further clarification and should be interpreted with caution. Many institutions developed, for example, a conduct with a cyclic course of several years. That results in the fact that for them, no programme has yet gone through a full cycle of the conduct (possibly with the exception of some pilot programmes where the process was accelerated). Often, a start has been made in all the programmes (components of the conduct already gone through). In some institutions, the conduct

cycle runs concurrently in all programmes, other institutions will assess (groups of) programmes consecutively.

Institutions that for certain programmes rely on external assessing bodies, do not necessarily assess each programme by their conduct. As a result, the totals which can be extracted from the following table (the last four columns) differ in a positive or negative sense from the total number of programmes in the second column.

It is important to note that some institutions not only concentrate their conduct on programmes, but carry out transversal, thematic audits across programmes as well (normally for all programmes and service departments at the same time, focusing on a particular aspect). These thematic audits supply additional information that is not contained in the table below.

Finally, there are also institutions that will adjust their conduct following the visit and advice from the panel. Hence, they have put the planned rollout of the conduct on hold for a while, resulting in a relatively large number of programmes in the last column.

That does not mean that all of these programmes remain completely ignored. The institutions closely monitor the quality of their programmes by means of their quality assurance activities. After all, in all institutions, this monitoring through queries, indicators, study progress... is a continuous process.

So, the following information does not show all the efforts that have already been made by the institutions regarding the quality assurance of programmes. They do show, however, that institutions have already subjected a significant proportion of their programmes to their conduct.

Institution ¹	Total number of programmes	Assessed at time of review	Assessed on 11/09/2017	Under assessment on 11/09/2017	Out of the picture
AP	31	21	24	3	5
Artevelde	23	1	9	14	0
EhB	27	0	0	27	0
HoGent	45	4	0	45	0
Howest	21	2	5	16	0
HZS	3	3	3	0	0
Karel de Grote	22	3	10	12	0
KU Leuven	305	191	195	110	0
LUCA	19	2	2	2	15
Odisee	34	3	9	25	0
PXL	25	0	0	25	0
Thomas More	48	5	8	1	39
UAntwerpen	93	4	31	62	0
UCLL	31	0	0	31	0
UGent	185	7	146	39	0
UHasselt	39	0	5	12	22
VIVES	42	0	3	7	32
VUB	103	9	35	68	0

3.11.3 Introduction of the external, independent view

Each of the stakeholder groups has its own perspective on the quality of education. To monitor the quality of programmes, institutions must grasp these different perspectives. Therefore, NVAO's *Quality Code - Flanders 2015-2017* pays particular attention to the

¹ For an overview of the institutions, see appendix 1.

involvement of internal and external stakeholders on the one hand, and external and independent peers (from the field) and experts (with, for example, expertise in education or in the professional field) on the other hand. This involvement can demonstrate the quality of the programmes in an authoritative way.

Because the quality assurance system allocates more responsibility to the institution itself, it is crucial that panels can establish that institutions in their own conduct devote sufficient attention to the introduction of these external, independent views.

In almost all procedures, the panels have given a strong recommendation to further reflect on the strengthening of the external, independent view. First of all, it appears that the factor "external" can be interpreted in very different ways. Graduates of the institution who have some years of working experience, are theoretically externals. Also research partners, traineeship supervisors or representatives of the professional field who serve on programme advisory boards are external. Institutions should, however, beware of recruiting from too small a pool and try to involve fresh blood regularly. The link to the factor "independent" also plays an important role here.

Secondly, a unilateral or rather limited focus from the programmes on their discipline, results in the involvement of peers and experts from a particular niche only (e.g. representatives from the professional field from a sub-domain of the programme discipline). The complete overview of the discipline or an up-to-date professional profile soon gets out of the picture. It is therefore important that institutions indicate in their conduct how outsiders are selected. In a subsequent institutional review, the panel then can pass judgment on it.

Thirdly, panels have often asked clarifying questions about the expertise that is expected from externals, how many interns and externals are minimally involved and in what proportions, and what role they play in different parts of the conduct. External parties can, in fact, be used in different ways and in different components of the conduct, for example, in examination committees, programme evaluations, working groups and advisory boards, moments of reflection about social challenges or updates of the curriculum... On top of that, institutions should also show how their independence is guaranteed.

Finally, it appears that where the institutions appoint panels for ensuring the quality of programmes, students are not always included in these panels. Although the input of students can be collected in other ways, this aspect deserves sufficient attention, especially because the ESG mention the presence of student members in evaluation panels as an absolute requirement. Institutions indicate that the involvement of students from outside the institution is practically difficult to organize. Some institutions have chosen to involve their own students. In that case, it needs to be ensured that it concerns students who can offer an external, independent view. This can be done, for example, by selecting students from another campus and programme.

3.11.4 Public information

When developing a quality assurance system with institutional reviews, public transparency about the current status of the quality of programmes is an issue for stakeholders, and particularly for students. For the institutions greater autonomy and granted ownership on the quality assurance of programmes go hand in hand with a duty of accountability which previously lay with NVAO.

The reports show the struggle of the institutions with this aspect of their conduct. A part of the institutions has presented clear ideas and approaches to the panels. Another part stated that the ideas were still under development. It often turned out that institutions adopted a wait-and-see attitude and referred to a possible alignment among the institutions about what the public information on the quality of the programmes should minimally encompass. As different institutional reviews succeeded each other, it became clear that real progress was made in a short time, but that there were equally steps to be taken.

3.11.5 Consolidation

It was noticed by the panels and NVAO that the institutions have made tremendous efforts in the run-up to the institutional review. There is a startling evolution, both at the level of the individual institutional and at the level of the higher education community as a whole.

The many actions and initiatives that have been developed, are now entrenched and consolidated. On the other hand, panels have found that the conduct is often quite heavily rigged, either as a way of institutions to protect themselves adequately against the assessment of it, or to ensure that they do not miss out on anything. The question must be asked how realistic this is in the long term, and whether it can be acceptable for something to stay (temporarily) under the radar. A perfectly watertight system is, after all, an utopian dream. Panels often advised institutions to examine whether in time, they can find opportunities to reduce unnecessary or excessive efforts or lower the intensity of certain processes. In this way, a healthy balance can be achieved between workload and return of the quality assurance system.

The question that pops up constantly is: do institutions want full ownership or are they asking for help through guidelines, criteria, initiatives from the government, the Sounding Board or NVAO?

Advice on the conduct

The table below summarizes the non-institution-bound advice, formulated by the various panels after studying the conduct developed by the institutions. Particularly, attention to public information, guaranteeing the external, independent view, and strengthening the contribution of students catch the eye, and these elements recur in one form or another in most of the institutions. Also paying attention to achieving the learning outcomes, the quality of thesis projects, and the overall end level of the programme is advice that turns up repeatedly. In some institutions, it is recommended to thoroughly think about the use and elaboration of a rating scale. Clarifying the conformity between the own conduct and the ESG, collaborative learning within the institution, and concern for the benchmarking of each programme seem obvious, but are highlighted once again in the recommendations. Finally, the panels are aware of the workload associated with the newly developed conduct. They ask for this aspect to be evaluated in the years to come, and if necessary, to examine whether the workload could be reduced, for example by decreasing the frequency of certain initiatives and by limiting the volume of certain reports.

Some of the advice

At the central level pay sufficient attention to the desired improvements and engage with programmes about their potential and weaknesses

Better secure the independence of, in particular, the internal panel members; for example, by instructing the internal experts on education who will participate in an audit panel, so they can properly separate the roles of auditor and counselor

Clarify the scaling-up of findings to the central level: clearly identify at which level which aspects are discussed and who determines the urgency and priority

Consider the possibility of providing differentiated communication to different target groups; it pays to involve the own students in finding appropriate forms of communication

Consider whether the external view may still be enhanced by involving students from another institution in the programme audits

Consult programmes more actively on the panel composition

Develop a clear procedure about the approval of the composition of the panels and clarify who is responsible for it

Develop an unambiguous policy on internal information sharing and, where necessary, adjust communication about the components of the conduct to the different target groups
Ensure that international substantive benchmarking can be carried out for each programme
Ensure that the student input is straightened out throughout and reassess the composition of the audit panels because the presence of a student is a requirement according to the ESG; ensure in this way that the external perspective of students is included in the programme audits
Ensure, by means of selection criteria for external participants in programme reviews and focus groups, that (international) substantive benchmarking can be carried out for each programme
Examine regularly within the six-year cycle whether the assessment reaches an appropriate level and whether thesis projects secure the achieved level
Extend the panel with more external subject matter experts
First of all, pay attention, for example on the basis of a specific action plan, to how the conduct system and the results of the programme assessments will be made public
Focus more on independence, which implies that externals have no affiliation with the institution
Further refine the guidelines on the composition of the audit panels
Further reflect on the role of the external peers and then decide how much external members should be present in the panel
Identify areas for improvement for each programme on which can also be communicated publicly to all stakeholders and society at large
In the conduct, not only look at what is done, but also pay attention to feedforward, to preview focused on future-oriented innovation
In the public information, also record the judgment of external parties on the end level of the programme
Increase effectiveness of the components of the conduct by sharing relevant results of a programme with other programmes in the context of collaborative learning
Investigate whether creativity in the quality assurance process itself can be encouraged, and if any other qualification of the levels of development may better respond to the function that the institution has in mind with this categorization
Invite programmes to involve the staff, even more than is happening at present, in the preparation, implementation and follow-up of evaluations
Involve students in a concerted manner when formulating both the strengths and the weaknesses of the programme
Involve the Internal Audit Service in the meta-evaluation of the effectiveness of the conduct
Keep thinking about ways to involve students as much as possible in the defined processes
Maintain the strict separation between monitoring and evaluation on the one hand, and guidance and support on the other hand, especially when both tasks are placed with the same staff members
Make sure - through evaluation of the conduct system itself - that the intended approach is kept lean and mean: it is not just about allocating funds but also about bearing in mind that quality assurance is not a goal in itself but an instrument for the realization of the educational vision
Make sure that sufficient independent peers, experts in the field, are involved to ensure the quality achieved and especially the learning outcomes
Make use of the learning culture and attitude to better exploit the external environment for the further development of quality assurance

Monitor identified actions for improvement consistently and permanently and clearly communicate on them to all stakeholders
Offer more transparency about how the different tools, processes and procedures contribute to the continuous closing of the PDCA cycle
Present information made available to the external panel in a structured way, with special regard to the visibility of the relevant parts
Provide more structure and support to programmes to give proper shape to a substantive benchmark
Quickly proceed to the implementation of the first management reviews that are required to embed more control and follow-up in the PDCA cycle, and to ensure that the six-year policy cycle is closed
Reflect on the relevant components of publicly accessible information for different target groups (prospective students, current students, staff, parents, the Board of Directors, the professional field, or third parties)
Secure that in the future new topics that are to be assessed (thematic audits) continue to meet the government's quality requirements and the priorities of the (educational) policy
Sharpen the relationship between binding/guiding measures on the one hand and the development-oriented approach on the other hand; clearly state what minimum needs to be achieved
Specify more explicitly how the institution assesses compliance for each of the programmes on the quality requirements of its own reference framework
Specify more explicitly how the own conduct relates to the ESG
Specify the rationale behind the own conduct, also on paper
Structurally embed the collaboration with other institutions in Belgium and abroad in the interest of benchmarking and extend it further at the institutional and programme level
The panel is not convinced that the use of a rating scale lends added value to the reporting; if a rating scale is kept, the panel proposes to provide more rating categories, to allow for more nuance
Think about how action can be taken if a panel in an audit of a programme concludes that certain elements are not adequately dealt with
When selecting the external panels, opt for panel members that are more distant to the programme, from the wider (international) field, that can take a critical look to the programme

4 Trust and appreciation

4.1 Development and trust

Following the development of a system with institutional reviews, several institutions have thoroughly examined and renewed their educational vision and educational policy or strategic policy plan. Where the new policy is still some way off, the panel took, as indicated above, the current policy as a reference point for its investigation. However, a number of institutions has already started the implementation of the new policy. There as well, the panel looks at the current situation and therefore at the new policy.

However, this sometimes implies that there, few concrete results can be presented, and that monitoring and adjustment of the policy are not yet applicable. In those cases, the panel engaged with the institution on what is on the table and what mechanisms are developed to monitor the effectiveness of the policy in the future. Panels hereby express their confidence in what they hear on the basis of existing evidence from past policy, they identify the strengths they see and the concerns and potential opportunities for further development.

It is clear that the assessment of the effectiveness of fresh policy, was not an easy task for the panels. Also in the future, institutions will regularly change or replace their educational vision and policy in response to changes in the higher education area and socio-economic transformations. However, it needs to be ensured that in the run-up to an institutional review a complete picture of the institution and its policies can be presented to the panel. Changes in policy must not be an excuse to avoid a judgment on the current situation. Panels may express confidence in the future, but make a judgment on the basis of the here and the now, and evidence from the past.

4.2 The Appreciative Approach

NVAO has broken new ground on the assessment of the Flemish universities and university colleges and developed to this end the Appreciative Approach. In the institutional review the panel took the context of the institution as a reference point and it looked at the educational policy from the perspective of the institutional board. It did not address the choices made by the institution in term of content, but it looked at the way the institution deals with those choices in planning, implementing and monitoring the policy. In the assessments, particular attention was paid to what is going well, with a focus on embedding and encouraging good practices.

From the above philosophy, it follows that the institutions were expected to interpret and to complement the assessment framework themselves. This framework was therefore neither prescriptive nor modeling.

Also, all parts of the process were designed appreciative by NVAO: from the instruction of all panel members, over the organization of the site visits and the consistency methodology, to the final reporting.

In that way, NVAO's approach recognizes the responsibility that institutions have taken in recent decades regarding their educational policy and the quality assurance at the programme level.

During the first institutional reviews, some of the panel members were in search of the right balance between an appreciative and critical-investigative attitude. It is important to emphasize that both are not mutually exclusive. Appreciation does not lie in the mere identification of the positive, neither does it mean that the panel should look for opportunities to give a pat on the back. The appreciation is in the respect for the context and character of the institution, its staff and its quality culture. Substantive choices are not called into question, and the panel tries as much as possible to omit its

own views and to start from the perspective of the institution. From there, the implementation of the policy and the effectiveness of actions, initiatives, processes and tools should be approached critically to reveal opportunities for further enhancement and to advise on embedding of good practices.

In the co-creation moments at the end of each visit, the panels shared their (provisional) findings with the people in charge of the institution. The term co-creation did not always evoke the right expectations. Perhaps, it would be better to speak of a constructive reflection, jointly with the institution, and with the context of the institution as a point of reference, to develop a common understanding of the status of the implementation of the educational policy and the quality assurance system within the institution.

4.3 Ensuring consistency

Consistency concerns the way the evaluation report and the judgment in this report are structured in order to make sure that institutions are treated equally ("feel treated equally"). By reporting in an appreciative manner, the comparability of the reports is not obvious. Nevertheless, the way in which individual reports differ, should not lead to the conclusion that they seem to contradict each other.

Therefore, after each cluster of six institutional reviews, NVAO's project team carried out a cluster analysis. Each of the reports was scrutinized by two critical readers from the project team, especially with regard to the equitable basis of the judgments and the traceability of the investigation of the panel. Where applicable, adjustments were suggested to the panels.

On top of the cluster analysis, NVAO also organized peer review sessions with panel chairs and secretaries after each cluster to achieve methodological insights. Chairs notified their colleagues how they worked and shared good practices to shape the appreciative dialogue and the co-creation sessions. In doing so, there was no aim to reach a compromise. Indeed, there was no scenario for the organization of the dialogue prescribed by NVAO. Moreover, what works in one context, does not necessarily have the same result in a different setting. During the peer review sessions with the secretaries the appreciative versus critical attitude was discussed, and experiences were exchanged about the reporting. The issues included a desired and undesired normative questioning, habituation to the Appreciative Approach, the potential and pitfalls of the appreciative dialogue, the role of the process coordinator and the chair of the panel in all of this, and the justification and level of detail in the reports.

The clustered approach in which all institutions were assessed in one year and a half, implied that the organization of the eighteen institutional reviews was shaped as a whole. This, undoubtedly, had a positive impact on the consistency. In the composition of the panels an optimal overlap was pursued (e.g. a regular pool of chairs, a permanent panel member for the reviews of all universities). During the entire period, all process coordinators involved had weekly meetings to monitor the state of affairs, irrespective of whether they themselves were active in a procedure at that time or not. Also at the institutions, the clustered approach has led to fruitful interaction and exchange of expertise. NVAO noted a strong involvement and great commitment within the institutions to reflect on the approach together. To enable direct communication between NVAO and the institutions, each institution was asked to designate one or two contacts. At regular intervals, "SAMENaries" ("seminars together") were organized, in which contacts, possibly accompanied by other quality assurance staff, were invited to reflect further on the organization of the procedures. Obviously, such a large clustering is a one-time exercise, if only due to the enormous workload that NVAO was facing for a period of two years.

5 NVAO's insights

This first round of institutional reviews shows the current state of the quality of Flemish higher education. The institutions have demonstrated that they are able to put up a strong vision and an adjoining policy. Only the internal feedback and monitoring systems still appear at this stage to be an area of concern. Many institutions - including those with a positive verdict - will undergo further development in this respect.

NVAO has learned from the institutional reviews that the Flemish universities and university colleges have made significant effort in recent years to give quality a prominent place in their educational policy and policy implementation. After all, a mature educational policy entails paying attention to quality. NVAO now has found that quality of education is on the agenda at all levels within the institutions and that the institutions have progressed towards a quality culture. The quality of higher education can be called downright good.

The institutions have also shown that the stereotype of the ivory tower is not valid. Current societal challenges play an important role in the policy development of the universities and university colleges. The focus on the outside world that panels have found at the institutional level, could be extended more explicitly to the programme level.

Indeed, in shaping the conduct, institutions still seem somewhat hesitant with regard to how the external, independent view should be organized at programme level. To be internationally acceptable, this external perspective on quality is, however, a requirement. Institutions must thereby make the right decisions. NVAO states here that the less frequently this external perspective is introduced, the more elaborate this perspective should be. The selection of externals plays, of course, a crucial role. Institutions and programmes decide for themselves who they involve and in which way. This also applies to the interpretation of who is regarded as external and independent. The specification of this interpretation and of expertise profiles clarifies the selection of experts and helps the institutions in pointing out this aspect of their conduct.

The institutional reviews show that the institutions have placed, as requested by NVAO, the involvement of external, independent experts at the heart in creating their conduct. This raises the question of whether this involvement should result in explicit judgments about the quality of the programmes. If there is some sort of judgment, this should best be done on the basis of transparent criteria and assessment rules. NVAO finds it particularly important that the management of the institution comes to explicit judgments, based on all findings and results of the conduct, thus including reports arising from the involvement of external, independent experts. This may, of course, also occur without an explicit judgment on every part of the conduct.

Internal and external demonstration of assured quality is inextricably linked to this judgment. In recent years, NVAO has devoted much attention to the discussion about publicly accessible information about the quality of programmes that is provided by the institutions themselves. Furthermore, NVAO has always stressed that this public information is the institution's own analysis of the quality of programmes, and that this analysis is established on the basis of the outcomes and results of their own conduct. The publication as such, from the complete findings and results of the conduct, does not necessarily make the programme quality transparent. Moreover, this might obviously result in additional editorial work being done on these findings, and therefore lead to an additional workload within the conduct. NVAO particularly sees added value in public information if it includes, in addition to strengths and concerns for the programme that were identified on the basis of the conduct, how the programme will further deal with the issues and what timetable is proposed. In the assessment reports from the past, the latter two elements were never included.

In addition, it should be clear to everyone where this public information comes from. It is not self-generated information (or PR) but information that can be traced to one or more results or outcomes of the own conduct.

In the future, NVAO wants to include not just this traceability but also the justification and validity of the public information on the quality of programmes in its assessment of an institution. It cannot be the intention that strengths or issues are published inaccurately or not at all. For NVAO, it is clear that public information is an important lead in shaping the future institutional review.

So, in the future, the institutional review will not only assess the educational policy, but also the conduct. The starting point is the question whether the institution has an effective educational policy including an own conduct, which ensures that programme quality is secured. The Appreciative Approach, developed by NVAO, seems to work well in the Flemish context, and will also remain in the future the guiding quality assurance philosophy of the Flemish quality assurance system. NVAO still wants to further develop and clarify this philosophy. A training session on this philosophy for the carefully selected panel members is an absolute requirement. NVAO will thereby make more effort on the dynamics of the site visit and the creation of the dialogue. In addition, NVAO will in its instruction of panel members, pay due attention to building and sharing insights and to the assessment of the conduct of the institutions. NVAO will in the future also monitor the administrative burden that the quality assurance system inherently entails. The evaluation carried out by the Evaluation Group will provide evidence of this burden from the past round of reviews. NVAO already wants to indicate that for her it is difficult to make a statement. Some of the administrative costs that were previously externally imposed, are now internalized in the institutions. These costs are perceived differently by institutions because they offer direct added value for various aspects of their own policies. Moreover, institutions have in recent years invested much time and energy in the development of their educational policy and their conduct. That learning curve is gradually converted to learning gains and lower administrative costs. NVAO expects, therefore, that the majority of institutions effectively will experience a reduction in costs once their conduct is at cruising speed.

In 2014, NVAO strongly advocated to make the institutions responsible for the quality assurance of programmes. This strengthening of the autonomy of the institutions also implies a major responsibility to be accountable as an institution over this quality. The public information on the quality of programmes is for society the most visible expression of that accountability. It is clear to all concerned that this aspect has undergone tremendous changes over the past two years and that institutions take such accountability seriously. However, some institutions still need to grow in the publishing of the required information. Also on this matter, NVAO lends its trust to the institutions, encouraged by the fact that the institutional reviews have shown that the given responsibility regarding the quality of programmes is fully deserved.

Appendix 1: Overview Flemish universities and university colleges

AP	Artesis Plantijn Hogeschool Antwerpen
Artevelde	Arteveldehogeschool
EhB	Erasmushogeschool Brussel
HoGent	Hogeschool Gent
Howest	Hogeschool West-Vlaanderen
HZS	Hogere Zeevaartschool
Karel de Grote	Karel de Grote-Hogeschool - Katholieke Hogeschool Antwerpen
KU Leuven	Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
LUCA	LUCA School of Arts
Odisee	Odisee
PXL	Hogeschool PXL
Thomas More	Thomas More Kempen & Thomas More Mechelen-Antwerpen
UAntwerpen	Universiteit Antwerpen
UCLL	UC Leuven & UC Limburg
UGent	Universiteit Gent
UHasselt	Universiteit Hasselt
VIVES	Katholieke Hogeschool Vives Noord & Katholieke Hogeschool Vives Zuid
VUB	Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Appendix 2: Timetable institutional reviews

	Oct-15	Nov-15	Dec-15	Jan-16	Feb-16	Mar-16	Apr-16	May-16	Jun-16	Jul-16	Aug-16	Sep-16	Oct-16	Nov-16	Dec-16	Jan-17	Feb-17	Mar-17	Apr-17	May-17	Jun-17	Jul-17	
TM		1			2	3	4		5			6											7
HZS		1			2	3	4		5			6											7
UA		1			2	3	4		5			6											7
VUB			1			2	3	4	5			6											7
UGent			1			2	3	4	5			6											7
HoGent			1			2	3	4	5			6											7
Artef.								1				2	3	4		5	6						7
HoWest								1				2	3	4		5	6						7
KdG								1				2	3	4		5	6						7
KULeuven									1				2	3	4		5	6					7
PXL									1				2	3	4		5	6					7
Odisee									1				2	3	4		5	6					7
AP												1	2	3	4		5	6					7
EhB												1	2	3	4		5	6					7
UCLL												1	2	3	4		5	6					7
VIVES												1	2	3	4		5	6					7
LUCA												1	2	3	4		5	6					7
UH												1	2	3	4		5	6					7

Step 1: Administrative consultation
 Step 2: Submit critical reflection and conduct pilot report to NVAO
 Step 3: 1st site visit
 Step 4: 2nd site visit, including third review trail
 Step 5: Preliminary draft evaluation report and advisory report
 Step 6: Consolidation procedures (for consistency and evaluation)
 Step 7: Decision-taking NVAO all procedures, including all underlying reports and overview report

Appendix 3: Composition of panels

Hogere Zeevaartschool	Universiteit Antwerpen
Em. prof. dr. ir. Guy Aelterman (chair) Prof. dr. mr. Gerard Mols Karin Van Loon Jan Ginneberge Inge Van de Caveye Bea Bossaerts (secretary)	Em. prof. dr. Antonia Aelterman (chair) Em. prof. dr. Frank van der Duijn Schouten Prof. dr. ir. Alain Delchambre Patrick Audenaerde Miet Vandemaele Mark Delmartino (secretary)
Hogeschool Gent	Universiteit Gent
Eric Halsberghe (chair) Dr. Kitty Kwakman Elfriede Heinen Jan van den Nieuwenhuijzen Allyson Robert Mark Delmartino (secretary)	Dr. ir. Elisabeth Monard (chair) Em. prof. dr. Frank van der Duijn Schouten Prof. dr. Yves Roggeman Tom Coolen Jasmine Van Mol Jetje De Groof (secretary)
Thomas More Hogeschool	Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Em. prof. dr. Joke Denekens (chair) Dr. Kees Boele Michel van Lieshout Annette Geirnaert Jeroen Kerstens Marianne van der Weiden (secretary)	Em. prof. dr. Harry Martens (chair) Em. prof. dr. Frank van der Duijn Schouten Prof. dr. ir. Vincent Wertz Frank van Massenhove Sofie Detaille Suzanne den Tuinder (secretary)
Arteveldehogeschool	Hogeschool PXL
Em. prof. dr. Harry Martens (chair) Dr. Mirjam Woutersen/Pim Breebaart Michel van Lieshout Jan Ginneberge Allyson Robert Bea Bossaert (secretary)	Em. prof. dr. Antonia Aelterman (chair) Jan Welmers Karin Van Loon Jan van den Nieuwenhuijzen Sofie Detaille Mark Delmartino (secretary)
Hogeschool West-Vlaanderen	Karel de Grote Hogeschool
Prof. dr. Dirk De Ceulaer (chair) Pim Breebaart Elfriede Heinen Annette Geirnaert Miet Vandemaele Suzanne den Tuinder (secretary)	Eric Halsberghe (chair) Prof. dr. mr. Gerard Mols Sophie Péters Patrick Audenaerde Jean Baptiste Bouckaert Jetje de Groof (secretary)
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven	Odisee
Dr. ir. Elisabeth Monard (chair) Em. prof. dr. Frank van der Duijn Schouten Prof. dr. Bernard Coulie Frank Van Massenhove Inge Van de Caveye Lieke Ravestein (secretary)	Em. prof. dr. ir. Guy Aelterman (chair) Mr. Leendert Klaassen Prof. dr. Yves Roggeman Etienne Wauters Allyson Robert Marianne van der Weiden (secretary)

Artesis Plantijn Hogeschool Antwerpen	Erasmushogeschool Brussel
Prof. dr. Dirk De Ceulaer (chair) Prof. dr. mr. Gerard Mols Karin Van Loon Annette Geirnaert Allyson Robert Mark Delmartino (secretary)	Eric Halsberghe (chair) Titia Bredée Sophie Péters Tom Coolen Inge Van de Caveye Barbara van Balen (secretary)
Katholieke Hogeschool Vives	LUCA School of Arts
Em. prof. dr. Harry Martens (chair) Dr. Anneke Luijten-Lub Prof. dr. ir. Vincent Wertz Jan Ginneberge Alexander Huybrechts Jetje de Groof (secretary)	Em. prof. dr. ir. Guy Aeltermann (chair) Diederik Schönau Michel van Lieshout Staf Pelckmans Joris Gevaert Suzanne den Tuinder (secretary)
UC Leuven-Limburg	Universiteit Hasselt
Em. prof. dr. Antonia Aeltermann (chair) Pim Breebaart Elfriede Heinen Etienne Wauters Lorenzo Ego Bea Bossaerts (secretary)	Dr. ir. Elisabeth Monard (chair) Em. prof. dr. Frank van der Duijn Schouten Prof. dr. Bernard Coulie Dr. Marijke Korteweg Inge Van de Caveye Marianne van der Weiden (secretary)

Appendix 4: Model programme of the first site visit

Day 1 First site visit

09:00-10:00	Meet-and-greet <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Introduction institutional reviews and approach (process coordinator)- Short introduction of the review panel (panel chair)- Meet-and-greet
10:00-10:50	Session 1: Depending on the critical reflection Possible topics: quality culture, educational vision, educational policy, vision of quality of programmes, vision of conduct, societal challenges, strategic goals
10:50-11:10	Break Internal feedback - informal consultations
11:10-12:00	Session 2: Depending on the critical reflection Possible topics (overlap with previous session): quality culture, educational policy, strategic goals, policy implementation, policy evaluation
12:00-13:00	Lunch (private)
13:00-13:30	Additional information Both orally and in writing
13:30-14:20	Session 3: Depending on the critical reflection Possible topics (overlap with previous session): quality culture, policy implementation, policy evaluation, involvement of stakeholders, peers and experts, improvement policy
14:20-14:40	Break Internal feedback - informal consultations
14:40-15:30	Session 4: Depending on the critical reflection Possible topics (overlap with previous session): quality culture, involvement of stakeholders, peers and experts, improvement policy
15:30-16:00	Additional information Both orally and in writing
16:00-16:45	Students Session shaped by the students
16:45-17:00	Break (Transfer to location free consultation hour)
17:00-18:00	Free consultation hour

Day 2 First site visit

09:00-10:00	Focus theme 1 Suggestion by panel or institution
10:00-10:15	Break Internal feedback - informal consultations
10:15-11:15	Focus theme 2 Suggestion by panel or institution
11:15-12:00	Additional information Both orally and in writing
12:00-13:00	Lunch (private)
13:00-14:00	Open hour On the invitation of the panel or on request of the institution
14:00-15:00	Private consultation review panel Substantive preparation co-creation and trails
15:00-15:30	Coffee break
15:30-17:00	Co-creation institution and review panel Discussion review trails
17:00-18:00	Practical organization of review trails Present: relevant staff of institution

Appendix 5: Related documents

Framework for Institutional Reviews - Flanders 2015-2017

Quality Code - Flanders 2015-2017

Scenario Institutional Review - Flanders 2015-2017

Timetable Institutional Review - Flanders 2015-2017

Q&A institutional reviews on NVAO's website

Organization first site visit - comprehensive institutional review

Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)

Appendix 6: List of abbreviations

NVAO Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organization

ESG Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area

PDCA Plan-Do-Check-Act

Editorial information

Overview report on the institutional reviews

The quality of the educational policies at the
Flemish universities and university colleges

September 11, 2017

Composition: NVAO Department Flanders

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NVAO

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