

## When Stakes are High.

### *An elaboration on Stakeholder Involvement in External Quality Assurance in Flanders Higher Education*

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### Abstract

*In this paper we will argue that the outcomes of EQA can be seen as the feedback from the stakeholders, or, as defined by Harvey and Green, a "stakeholders relative". We will underpin that there is a need for many stakeholders to be involved in the assessment process because of their critical share in quality and quality culture making. We also believe that based on the feedback of the stakeholders, it is possible to evaluate the impact of EQA activities and even to improve the EQA process significantly. Subsequently, an overview of stakeholder involvement in VLUHR QAU will be given.*

### A short overview of EQA in Flanders Higher Education

The Flemish Higher Education Council (VLUHR) is an autonomous but embedded body, established by the umbrella organizations of the Flemish universities (VLIR) and university colleges (VLHORA). These umbrella organizations aim at fostering dialogue and cooperation among the Flemish higher education institutions. One of the 'pillars' of these umbrella organizations is the external quality assurance of the higher education bachelor and master programs. From 2011 on VLIR and VLHORA gradually implemented internal changes and adjusted their activities and processes to a new VLUHR-structure. Concerning Quality Assurance, the VLUHR Board, VLIR and VLHORA prepared the factual merger of the quality assurance units of VLIR and VLHORA into one single unit, the Quality Assurance Unit (QUA) of VLUHR.

The QAU of VLUHR is operational since 1<sup>st</sup> January 2013 and is assigned by the decree to coordinate the external quality assurance of the study programs organized by the Flemish universities and university colleges. The current assessment system is characterized by an eight-yearly joint or 'clustered' program assessment carried out by a panel of peers. The programs are thus clustered by discipline or domain (for example all programs in history or management) and are evaluated by the same panel and are reported in one assessment report. While the QAU organizes the external quality assurance, the universities and university colleges are in charge of the internal quality assurance of the programs, which includes writing a self-evaluation report (SER), that serves as input for the panels' assessments. The assessment report, listing quality judgements and improvement measures, the output of a panel assessment, is subsequently used as input when submitting an application for accreditation.

## Defining quality

The organisation of external quality assurance (EQA) has been around in European higher education since the early nineties. In Flanders, the systematic review of the quality of higher education programmes started as early as 1992. Since then, a lot has been written internationally about quality assurance in higher education. Although the concept of quality was not new to the academic tradition, it came into sharper focus as the outside world suddenly emphasized the need for attention to it (Vroeijenstijn, 1995). Throughout the past decades, quality has shown to be a problematic and much debated concept. Although the idea of a consensus on the interpretation of the concept has always been far off, a certain trend is noticeable: quality is a concept that must be interpreted in context. In the late 80s, Becher (1989) defined quality as the result of political trends; while Neave (1986) claimed 'quality' to be an ungraspable and loaded concept. Later, for example Scott (1994) and McConville (1999) also concluded that it is hard to provide an allcompassing definition of quality in higher education. The nineties also brought more pragmatic definitions of the concept 'quality'. Such can be found in the article 'Defining Quality' (1993) by Harvey and Green, who approached the assessment of quality in higher education as a "stakeholders relative". Quality for them is not an eternal truth or a definite answer to a need. On the contrary, quality is a concept open to *interpretation*. The definition of what quality is, changes according to Harvey and Green along with the target group and throughout time. Quality is also defined by the conditions under which quality is worked at and by the point of view higher education is looked at. In that same line, Watty (2003) narrows down the focus of how quality can be defined to the perspective of academics. Other approaches also focused on how the concept of quality takes shape according to the perceptions at hand.<sup>1</sup> In specific a social constructivist approach on quality assurance was drawn out by Ratcliff (2003).

It is clear from these more recent definitions that systematic stakeholder engagement is an important prerequisite for an effective grasp of what quality is. Stakeholder involvement also boosts trust in quality assurance practices rendering a direct impact on quality culture (Beckers, Cortvriendt & Van den Bosch, 2011). Today, the idea of multi-involvement in quality making is echoed in both EQA policy making as in the actual EQA procedures in higher education. In Flanders, as internationally, stakeholders, whether higher education institutions, students, employers or society and government, have their say in how EQA in higher education takes shape. Because the general view on higher education quality is determined by the various expectations and perceptions of many towards the quality of higher education, stakeholder involvement is also internationally clear in the external quality assurance processes in higher education. In most countries and regions as in Flanders, higher education policy makers and stakeholders have steered towards a system of quality evaluation by assessment panels that represent a collection of their own perspectives. In Flanders, assessment panels, as composed by VLUHR, must by decree bring together a set of expertises that can be connected to different stakeholders' perceptions of qualitative higher education programmes. In other words, the complexity of (educational) quality itself brings about a complex higher education EQA system and EQA involvement. The demand to meet stakeholders expectations in higher education EQA has also grown in recent years, underlining their importance. For example *impact analysis* has kept quite some quality assurance agencies busy and others baffled. The finality of it being partly: meeting stakeholders' demand for accountability. The European Standards and Guidelines refer clearly to the importance of stakeholders' engagement for QAUs.<sup>2</sup>

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1 More on the definition of 'quality' as a concept can be found in i.a. L. Harvey (1995), J. Warn & P. Tranter (2001), Harvey & Newton (2004) and Newton (2002 & 2007).

2 Some ESGs clearly demand stakeholder involvement, others imply it. In ESG 3.8 that covers the 'Accountability procedures', stakeholder engagement is seen as an explicit prerequisite with regard to accountability

The European Standards and Guideline 3.8 has been set as follows :

Agencies should have in place procedures for their own accountability (...) These procedures are expected to include the following:

- (1) "A published policy for the assurance of the quality of the agency itself",
- (2) "IQA procedures, which include an internal feedback mechanism",
- (3) "an internal reflection mechanism"
- (4) "an external feedback mechanism (...) i.e., means to collect feedback from experts and reviewed institutions for future development in order to inform and underpin its own development and improvement.

In recent years, higher education external QUA's and organisations came to the belief that the involvement of stakeholder had an added value. Most have also devoted a fair amount of work force to this topic. The outcome of peer discussions is often similar: EQA agencies and organisations are still searching for an efficient methodology, for a way to measure their impact on higher education quality. To be able to that, one must find *a way to measure the uncountability of quality*, the uncountability of a variety of perceptions. First off, we think it is necessary to shed off the constant demand of figures and facts that seems to be the trend these days to be able to interpret quality effectively. Needless to say, this also goes for the impact one can have on that quality. The fact that quality in our view can only be approached as being a stakeholders relative holds a possibility to interpret the way that EQA agencies have an impact on higher education. Carolus, Cortvriendt en Van den Bosch (2012) defined five categories of perception based on the most common expectations seen in stakeholders with regard to EQA:

- When EQA is perceived as a calendar by stakeholders, it serves as the opportunity to set up a definite timetable for their QA activities.
- When EQA is perceived as a magnifier, panels are seen as important peer groups, giving programmes usable feedback on their practices.
- When EQA is perceived as a mirror, the views of panels are internalised by programmes, or at least by some staff, enabling programmes to reflect in a more systematic way on their quality.
- When EQA is perceived as a catalyst, panels' views are not only internalised but also shared by most staff. In fact, programmes become identities as staff become increasingly aware that all educational practices are a collective responsibility.
- When EQA is perceived as a label, programmes will focus on the visibility, or even marketability of their quality. EQA becomes a means to inform stakeholders about the quality of programmes.<sup>3</sup>

The idea is that the need for collaboration in the safeguardment and improvement of higher education quality can be evaluated through the study of stakeholders' perception. *Why?* Because we realize the perception of stakeholders is a strong force in making quality and quality culture in higher education work but also in safeguarding and improving our own quality and quality culture. It is our believe that these perception categories are able to generally grasp the way in which stakeholders perceive our EQA activities. In correspondence with that belief, we think stakeholder involvement is vital to be able to evaluate and manage the quality of our own processes. On top of that, we believe that stakeholder collaboration also creates a form of trust (Beckers, Cortvriendt & Van den Bosch, 2011). Ensuring involvement, makes stakeholder collaboration more durable and therefore EQA more relevant, which further assures the ability to steer higher education quality in the 'right' direction. For VLUHR QAU, stakeholder collaboration is self-evident. Because of its activities, an efficient and effective collaboration with its stakeholders is essential.

## Stakeholder involvement

The current system of quality assurance in Flemish higher education exists out of cooperative relationships between the QAU and many stakeholders. Ownership of the process is an important aspect of this. By giving so many partners a

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The demand for stakeholder involvement can be clearly seen in the expectation for an external feedback mechanism, seen as collection of feedback from relevant stakeholders. (ENQA, p. 26)

More implicit demands towards stakeholder engagement can be found in e.g. ESG 2.8, on 'System-wide analysis'

The European Standards and Guideline 2.8 has been set as follows: QAAs should produce from time to time summary reports describing and analysing the general findings of their reviews, evaluations, assessments (...) [QAA's should] consider including a research and development function within their activities, to help them extract maximum benefit from their work. (ENQA, p. 22)

4 Carolus, Cortvriendt & Van den Bosch, 2013, p. 22-23

role in the assessment process, all feel responsible for the successful execution of the process. In doing this, programmes also feel themselves owner of the process and we believe quality will subsequently increase. The cooperation of the EQA with its stakeholders will also run more smoothly in time, and hence we argue that the quality of the EQA process will increase gradually as well.

The involvement of many stakeholders creates the necessity of a rigorous protocol with guidelines and even clear standards and criteria, which are defined before the assessment takes place. Those clear procedures guarantee that stakeholder involvement can never lead to any influence in the actual evaluation by the panel. For Flemish higher education, quality criteria and an accreditation framework are set up by the government, in consultation with VLUHR QAU, the HEIs, and the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO).<sup>4</sup> Next to the coming into existence of the accreditation framework, the relationship of VLUHR QAU with its stakeholders is most clear in its own activities. Most importantly, there is the cooperation between the QAU and the HEIs. As already mentioned the QAU of VLUHR is established by the umbrella organization of universities and university-colleges. A peer review on the functioning of the former QAUs of VLIR and VLHORA made clear that the narrow liaison between HEIs and a QAU portrays some problems with regard to the independence of the QAU. The review stated that no large problems were detected and that the ownership of HEIs was an important achievement, but that the QAU also had to establish an independent Steering Committee to further secure its independent workings. Last year, VLUHR has established an independent steering committee for VLUHR QAU that consists out of national and international quality assurance experts in higher education. Although VLUHR knows this organizational firewall, the connections between the QAU and the HEIs remain strong. Just like its other stakeholders, VLUHR QAU pays attention to their constant involvement. Since July 2013, an Advisory Committee, composed of representatives of the HEIs, students, representatives of the labour market and the trade unions, was established to create a dialogue.

Another way to ensure collaboration and input of the HEIs in VLUHR QAU's activities is the study programmes' active involvement in the assessment process. At the start, individual programmes are asked to put forward representative candidates for the peer review. During a meeting, all programmes within the same assessment cluster establish a shortlist of possible panel members in conversation with VLUHR QAU. Whilst it is the responsibility of the programmes to make sure that a panel exhibits the necessary expertise, it is the task of the QAU and its Steering Committee to check both the independence of each of the candidates as the gathered expertise in each panel. This selection procedure for panel members in the Flemish system of external quality assurance situates itself more on the ownership-side of the ownership-independence continuum. The importance of the programmes' views can also be seen during the site visits. The involvement of the programmes in the composition of the interviewee panels is crucial. They decide who is considered a representative partner for their results. The interviews with the stakeholders are an essential source of information in the programme assessment. The panel holds interviews with the programme board, with the staff, with students, with graduates and with representatives of the labour market. After the in situ visit, the reporting phase starts. Also at this stage, programmes have a say. Study programmes receive a copy of the panel's report in a first feedback phase and have three weeks to react to factual inaccuracies and/or to make comments of a substantive nature with regard to the panel's evaluation. So as one could see the programs has a say during the whole EQA process. Because of the strongly involvement of the HEI's and the particular programs, an atmosphere of dialogue and trust is created.<sup>5</sup>

During the assessment process one could define some other critically involved stakeholders. First of all, looking at a panel, it generally consists of four members, which have expertise in one or several domains. The VLUHR protocol defines six different domains of expertise: discipline-specific, international, educational approaches, audit, student and labour market. In reality, all important demands of the stakeholders are gathered in each panel. There is also a student member present, other members ensure the panel's expertise with regard to academic and professional demands. Furthermore, an international perspective is guaranteed and also educational quality is taken up by the

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4 The criteria are objective and static, which makes that all assessments in theory are comparable. But as mentioned before, a panel of peers assesses the programs and different stakeholders are involved. Thus make that one could argue that the criteria are in conformance with the preference of the panel and the stakeholders. In this way the criteria are more or less relative.

6 Beckers, Cortvriendt & Van den Bosch, 2012, p. 4.

panel. After the panel is composed, VLUHR QAU involves the accreditation body, NVAO, which gives an advise about the composition of the panels. Another important stakeholder involved in the panel composition, is the Flemish student association. The selection of student members is organized by the National union of students in Flanders (VVS), which communicates a selection proposal to the QAU. VVS has many contacts with students throughout Flanders, which ensures a representative target audience for panel members. In addition, the contacts with the student union create a good medium for VLUHR QAU to spread the panels conclusions to (potential) students.

In managing the contact with the different stakeholders, one could however think that a profound commitment of stakeholder involvement will hinder an effective assessment process. The VLUHR considers it, of course, essential to remain vigilant with regard to this. It is obvious that VLUHR QAU wants to be open-minded for any suggestion from the stakeholders to fine-tune the assessment process. Therefore, VLUHR uses different methods to collect and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data to clarify how stakeholders experience the process. First, a list of quantitative questionnaires, concerning the whole assessment process is provided to different stakeholders: the questionnaires are sent to the programme directors, the chairman and members of the panel, the NVAO, the Steering Committee of VLUHR and the VLUHR staff-members. These questioning is held twice: in the middle of the assessment process, just before the actual site visit and a second time when the whole process is finished. The gathered statistical data out the responses are later researched more in depth by interviewing selected members. This method makes it possible to detect recurring comments. These qualitative data analysis is held once every three years.

In line with our belief that the earlier defined perception categories can generally grasp most views on EQA activities, VLUHR decided to also implement a set of questions in its stakeholders' questionnaires to interpret the way correspondents perceive our activities as at a certain point in time. A first integration of these questions has happened in the first VLUHR questionnaires that were send out in June 2013. We hope to be able to give an overview and analysis of these results at a later point in time. It's our believe that taking the different perceptions into consideration in Flanders EQA is mostly seen as a magnifier and/or mirror. There are clear signs that many HEIs and study programmes have internalised aspects of EQA and that they see EQA as a vital element in assuring the quality of programmes. When we critically reflect on the EQA system in Flanders, the current state of affairs looks more like a quality assurance culture than a quality culture. Although an ideal perception, EQA as a catalyst therefore doesn't seem to be the dominant perception for programmes and panels. First, programmes focus too often on compliance. Secondly, many programmes focus on accountability, disregarding improvement measures formulates by panels.<sup>6</sup> We hope however that the results from the questionnaires will shed more light on the reality of this situation.

In conclusion, the fact that quality can be seen as a stakeholders relative turns the perception of stakeholders into a strong force in making quality and quality culture in higher education. VLUHR believes also that its systematic approach towards stakeholder involvement and its systematic evaluation of his EQA activities will be able to safeguard and gradually improve quality of the EQA process. By explicitly evaluating the perception of stakeholders in current and future questionnaires, VLUHR hopes to be able to gradually monitor the way in which stakeholders perceive our EQA activities in order to analyze its impact on higher education quality culture.

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7 Carolus, Cortvriendt & Van den Bosch, 2013.

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