

## Accreditation in the Netherlands

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Rome,  
13 - 15 november 2003)

# Verslag

datum  
17 november 2003  
onderwerp  
ACCREDITATION IN THE  
NETHERLANDS

1. Accreditation in the Netherlands has been introduced in the reform of Dutch H.E. towards the bachelor-master structure. Accreditation is seen as the independent proof that a certain quality-level has been reached by a programme.

During the discussions between minister and H.E.-institutions, and minister and parliament four goals for accreditation have been mentioned:

- a. accountability: politics, public opinion, the "taxpayer" ask from H.E.-institutions to be accountable for what they do with the money the government funds them with. Accreditation is one of the methods to show that quality has been delivered
  - b. funding: government has obliged H.E.-institutions to let the programmes be accredited before they will get funded
  - c. mobility-enhancement: if Europe really wants to be the most dynamic and innovative knowledge-economy then Europe should be developed as one labour-market with a European labour-population. One of the essential prerequisites therefore is the enhancement of mobility. Accreditation is one of the possible ways to improve comparability between programmes.
  - d. information facility: accreditation may be used as a possibility for giving information to students, employers and the public. Of course students and employers should be able to make a distinction between all different programmes, so for reasons of information only accreditation would not be enough.
2. Much to my surprise most stakeholders have accepted accreditation as a fact of life in a very short time. Of course some objections were raised, especially from the universities and one particular political party: they feared

that institutions and programmes would only strive for the minimum-demands necessary for getting the accreditation decisions. Eventually one chose for the following system:

- a. obligatory accreditation: necessary because of the funding-demand, each six years
- b. programme accreditation: two reasons for that:
  - a well-known institute should not necessarily execute only good programmes
  - deinstitutionalization of the binary system. Universities were allowed to teach professional programmes whereas universities of professional education were allowed to teach academic programmes (as long as they reach the prerequisites for accreditation of these specific programmes)
- c. accreditation should be developed in line with the well-known and broadly accepted Dutch Quality Assurance system and it should definitely not be developed as a new bureaucratic system parallel with the Q.A.-system. NAO therefore has to decide on the basis of reports by quality agencies
- d. all programmes that want to deliver degrees acknowledged by the Dutch government and want study-grants for their students younger than 30 years of age should be accredited. This means that all programmes by public as well as private institutions have to be accredited. The following number of programmes have to be accredited:

13 universities students	600 programmes	165.000
1 open university participants	25 programmes	20.000
48 universities of professional education students	1100 programmes	320.000
± 45 private institutions participants	700 programmes	100.000

- e. all accreditation-decisions have to be made public
- f. an appeal is possible

- 3. Netherlands Accreditation Organisation has been established as an independent body in June 2002.

- a. board of three fulltime members and four part-time → fulltime members are three former university presidents who of course resigned from their universities. Part-time members are the former minister of Education, two people with ample experience from industry, and one from the public sector
- b. budget is 3.6 million euro pro year, which means that programmes have only to pay a small fee for accreditation → each accreditation-application costs 2.500 euros
- c. staff of 20 people, ranging from lawyers to experts in all different disciplines
- d. the NAO developed frameworks for:
  - the accreditation of already existing programmes
  - the advising on the perceived quality of new programmes → eventually the minister takes the decision whether or not a new programme may start. These programmes must have had a positive advice by NAO!
  - "registration" of the Quality Agencies of which the NAO thinks that they can deliver good and fair reports
  - some specific new programmes, for instance the research-masters and programmes that want to enlarge the period of years a master will take

#### 4. Starting points

- a. respect for the field of H.E. No one is on purpose presenting a bad course. As former participants in the field of H.E. we are convinced that most programmes have a sufficient level to get accredited. We are not the accreditation police!
- b. an as close as possible cooperation or alliance with the existing Q.A.-system in order to keep the improvement-function of the system going
- c. no more bureaucratic burden nor high costs. The burden of the quality assurance-system is already high enough
- d. development of a framework that is compatible to international developments. Of course we want our system and the framework to be in line with the international developments
- e. close cooperation and dialogue with the institutes of H.E. I strongly believe that the institutions themselves and their staff should have the conviction that the accreditation is sound and fair. They are the ones that give the system the necessary legitimation.

5. The accreditation decision is dichotomous, it is yes or no; in the Netherlands there is no conditional or provisional accreditation. So there four possible accreditationresults: professional bachelor, academic bachelor, professional master and academic master.

professional	academic	
		master
		bachelor

Between academic and professional programmes exists a rather outspoken distinction:

- differences in aim and goals of the course;
- differences in content;
- differences in quality of staff, esp. research experience;
- differentiation in relationship with the professional field: very strong in the professional orientation, weaker in the academic orientation.

#### THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS

6. Accreditation is based on an application by an institution

The basis for the accreditation-decision is a report by an external panel. The report has to be based on the accreditation-framework, developed by our accreditation organization. I will come to that later.

The external panel has to be appointed by – preferably – a registered Quality Assurance Agency. Up till now five agencies have applied for registration and three applications have been rewarded.

We have judged the agencies on 5 points:

- a. the organizational and financial independence;
- b. their competence to compose panels of the required quality and diversity;
- c. their guarantees of the independence of the members of the panel and their way of conducting the evaluation-process;
- d. the operationalization of the NAO-framework;
- e. their competence to compose a domain-specific framework for validating the specific course.

Each institute or program is free to select an Agency. They may do this on the basis of the price, proven quality, method of executing the process. By and large you might say this is a strategic decision following the choice for a profile a programme has made.

7. Let me elaborate on the composition of the panel. We demand:
- disciplinary expertise;
  - educational expertise;
  - audit expertise;
  - a student;
  - international expertise or knowledge of the international developments in the field (where appropriate);
  - professional expertise/expertise from the professional field (where appropriate).

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of course one person may combine several expertises, but we obliged a panel to be composed at least of 4 persons (of which one is a student)

In the Netherlands we call this the GOD-criteria: Gezaghebbend, Onafhankelijkheid en Deskundigheid → Authority, Independence, Expertise.

8. The panel will execute their work on the basis of:

- desk research: a thorough examination of a programme's self study, self-evaluation or management review;
- site visit of in general two days in which they will see the programme management, teaching staff, students, facilities, the examinations, final thesises and if appropriate alumni and employers.

The judgement must be presented to staff and management, who - hopefully - will use the report to improve the course-quality and to apply for accreditation by NAO.

#### 9. The NAO-framework

Framework has been composed of 6 subjects, 21 aspects and about 30 criteria. Deliberately they are made open, so that programmes themselves, the panels or the quality assurance agencies are able to operationalize them on the basis of their needs and wishes. Of course in the report, that is part of the application, must be explained how the criteria are operationalized. Generally the Q.A. use a general framework (which they presented to us during their application for registration), but they are completed with domainspecific criteria.

Our subjects are:

1. aim and goals of the program (including the level of the degree);
2. content of the program (including the orientation, the programme itself, the examinations);
3. staff (quality and quantity);  
    enrollment (quality, numbers);
4. facilities, included possible study-hindering aspects;
5. internal quality assurance system;
6. results (qualifications, returns).

These subjects have to be judged as sufficient or not sufficient. In order to receive a positive accreditation all six subjects must be judged as "sufficient".

Each subject consists of a number of aspects, varying from two to eight. These aspects have to be judged on a four point scale: insufficient, sufficient, good or excellent. This has been done to find "best practices" and to give the panel the possibility to weight the different aspects. An "insufficient" on one aspect may be countered by a "good" or an "excellent" on an other aspect, so that the subject itself might be valued "sufficient" after all.

Panels have of course to give an argumentation for their judgements on aspects and subjects. The NAO must be able to reach a conclusion "on their own" by validating the panels' reports. If this is not possible, the NAO has to refuse the report as the basis for accreditation.

#### 10. Special features

- a. extra ordinary elements of quality. These may be part of the accreditation report, although they don't have any influence on the accreditation outcome: it is an extra.

They may be for instance:

- pedagogical system (for instance Problem Based Learning);
- internationalization (composition of staff and students);
- excellent relation with the workfield;
- excellent quality.

Also these special features have to be judged by a panel, in order for the NAO to validate the claim from the institute or programme.

#### 11. International relations

- a. Since September 3 of this year NAO is expected to be the accreditation organization for the Flemish part of Belgium as well. An agreement between the two governments has been reached, which will get into working in may 2004. Netherlands Accreditation Organization will be the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organization. We changed the website to NVAO.net. Two more full time members of the board, four more parttime members; staff will be enlarged with 9 more people. The H.E.-systems in Netherlands and Flanders look largely the same, but of course there are meaningful differences, which have to be taken into account in the frameworks and the procedures.

Most important differences:

- a. Flanders does not know the "professional master". All masters therefore are and have to be academic.
- b. The Flemish organizations of universities and universities of professional accreditation have been appointed as the quality assurance agencies by Flemish law. So this gives them a different position from their Dutch colleagues. Panel members have to be approved by a newly appointed committee.
- c. Flanders officially had a two cycle course in professional education. The masters were supposed to

have academic quality. Now that they legally are changed into academic masters there will have to be research included in courses and in the staff. This means that within a couple of years (with a maximum of eight) a dramatic change has to be implemented in the composition of the staff and that a research programme has to be developed in close cooperation with one of the research-universities. Therefore the Flemish H.E. is split up in "voluntary", mostly regionally-based, associations. These are thus composed of one university and a number of universities of professional education (minimum is two, maximum is eleven).

- d. The "arts" belong in the Netherlands to the field of professional orientation, in Flanders to the academic orientation.
  - e. The accreditation-period in Flanders is eight years, compared to the six in the Netherlands.
  - f. The appeal-procedure is completely different in Flanders.
  - g. Whereas the Flemish research (or traditional) universities have ample experience in quality assurance procedures (for almost ten years), the universities of professional education have only just begun with the self-evaluation and quality assurance-procedures.
  - h. Period of on month to restore trust after a negative decision. Government has to approve with this improvement-plan.
- b. ECA: officially founded in Cordoba, 2003, 11<sup>th</sup> of November
- goals: to understand and improve each others stand on accreditation in order to get "mutual recognition" of accreditation decisions accepted
  - membership: those officially recognized agencies that work with accreditations or accreditation-like procedures

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Akkreditierungsrat and those organizations that have been recognized by the Akkreditierungsrat

Germany:

Austria :  
Switzerland:  
Ireland: HETAC  
Norway: NOKUT  
Spain: ANECA

NVAO

- five working groups: "mutual recognition", "common framework of qualifications", "publication of accreditation results", "ministers' conference in Bergen" and "development in the field of accreditation".