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Abstract

This paper shares the results of the first external assessment of all Flemish post-graduate teacher education programmes, focussing on how cooperation contributes to improved quality.

The paper enquires external quality assurance (EQA) in 60 ECTS post-graduate teacher education programmes in Flanders. The 37 programmes offered by universities, university colleges and centres for adult education cooperate within 'expertise networks'. Main tasks of these networks are developing internal quality assurance (IQA) and preparing for external assessment.

The external assessment shows an increased attention for quality assurance and more cooperation between educational institutions. Nevertheless, the programmes are still very diverse in focus, scale and quality. A clear division of labour, in combination with intensified cooperation, could contribute to a further increase in quality.

Key words

Teacher education – Quality assurance – Cooperation - Flanders

Introduction

The Flemish Community is competent for education. In this paper we will only focus on the situation in the Dutch speaking Community in Belgium (Flanders). In Flanders two types of teacher education exist. On the one hand, 180 ECTS bachelor's programmes with a professional orientation are offered by university colleges (hogescholen). These programmes prepare students for a career in pre-school (age 3-6), primary (age 6-12) or first grade secondary school (age 12-15) teaching. Those programmes are subject to the standard EQA system in Flanders, based on external programme assessment. On the other hand 60 ECTS post-graduate teacher education programmes are offered to people who have hands-on experience or have an academic degree, and who want to teach their field of expertise in a secondary school (age 12-18). These programmes are offered by

universities, university colleges¹ and centres for adult education. To teach in higher education no formal teacher education diploma is required. This paper tackles the QA system which has been specifically developed for the latter type of teacher education, called 'Specifieke Lerarenopleiding'.

Universities offer post-graduate teacher education for their own graduates. In 2011-2012 universities counted for 1486 students. University colleges offer post-graduate teacher education in the fields of economics and the arts. They counted for 491 students. 24 centres for adult education offer post-graduate teacher education in diverse fields for people without degree, as well as for students with a secondary or higher education degree. They counted for 9201 students.

Post-graduate teacher education

After many years of discussion on how to organise teacher education, in 2006 a new Decree on teacher education² was adopted. This decree created a unified legal framework for teacher education programmes at universities, university colleges and centres for adult education. All post-graduate teacher education programmes are now offering the same 'teacher' degree. The post-graduate programmes were extended to 60 ECTS (1500 to 1800 hours of study load), of which 30 credits should focus on the theoretical basis of pedagogy and 30 credits ought to focus on practical training³. The credits for practical training relate to practical exercises at university, observation and student guidance, as well as to in-class teaching.

Since the 2006 Teacher education Decree, the requirements for post-graduate teacher education programmes are the same for the 38 institutions⁴. To stimulate cooperation between the different teacher education programmes, the decree (financially) stimulated institutions to organise themselves in 'expertise networks'⁵ composed of at least one university, one university college and one centre for adult education. These expertise networks aim at fostering dialogue and cooperation between the three mentioned types of institutions.

External quality assurance

The aims of external quality assurance are twofold: to help to improve the quality of education, and to account towards stakeholders and society for the quality institutions deliver.

The external quality assurance system for post-graduate teacher education programmes is largely based on the system as it is in place for higher education institutions (HEI). Essential features of this system are that it takes a programme or cluster of programmes as its starting-point, that it is organised along inter-institutional lines and that it starts with a critical self-evaluation report which the programme coordinators are required to compose. A panel of independent experts, composed in consultation with the institutions, then visits the programmes, discusses the quality of the programme with all relevant stakeholders, forms a judgement about the quality and formulates recommendations for improvement. The process is concluded with the publication of a public assessment report. The reports include a comparative description and comparative tables, but do not have the aim to rank programmes. All criteria and procedures for the site visit and judgement are clarified in a protocol, known by the panel of experts and the education institutions (although this project was the first confrontation with the external quality assurance system in higher education for centres for adult education). The programmes are assessed according to 21 quality aspects covering 6 themes, which together constitute a programme's quality profile. The assessment framework envisages grasping every aspect of a programme, focussing not only on the curriculum and results, but also on goals, staff, facilities and internal quality assurance. So, it is up to the reader of the reports to judge which aspects are most important for him/her and thus to evaluate which programme fits best his/her needs. The panel expresses its judgement per aspect on a 4-point scale: unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good and excellent. At the overarching theme-level (staff, quality assurance, ...) the score is unsatisfactory or satisfactory. A negative theme score leads to a negative overall score for the programme.

¹ Flanders has a binary higher education system. Universities offer academic bachelor's and master's programmes, while university colleges offer professional bachelor's programmes and education in the arts.

² Decreet betreffende de lerarenopleidingen in Vlaanderen, December 15th, 2006

³ Decreet betreffende de lerarenopleidingen in Vlaanderen, December 15th, 2006, Art.11 & 16

⁴ 38 institutions offer 37 programmes (one programme is jointly organised by two institutions).

⁵ Decreet betreffende de lerarenopleidingen in Vlaanderen, December 15th, 2006, Art.12

In 2011 and 2012, commissioned by the Flemish government, the first external assessment focussed on the quality of post-graduate teacher education programmes at the Flemish universities, at the university colleges and at the centre for adult education. The main difference in comparison to EQA in higher education is that the assessment isn't followed by an accreditation procedure. However, the Flemish Government might take follow-up measures for programmes with a negative evaluation. In dialogue with representatives of the expertise networks, the procedures for higher education have been adapted to the specific situation of the concerned programmes and the assessment framework has been changed slightly (19 quality aspects instead of 21).

VLIR-VLHORA cooperation

When preparations for the external assessment of the post-graduate teacher education programmes started, the external assessments of higher education programmes were entrusted to VLIR (Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad – Flemish Rector's Conference)⁶ and VLHORA (Vlaamse Hogescholenraad – Council of Flemish university colleges)⁷, which are the consultative and advisory bodies of the universities and university colleges. Within VLIR and VLHORA Quality Assurance Units (QAU) carried out the external assessments. Those two Quality Assurance Units were recognised by the Flemish Government, were full members of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and were registered with the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). Because at that time no quality assurance agency existed for centres for adult education, the assessment of the post-graduate teacher education programmes was assigned to VLIR and VLHORA. This external assessment was the first genuine common project carried out by VLIR and VLHORA, which made it an interesting experiment.

Within VLIR and VLHORA project managers⁸ were assigned to take the lead in this project and a Task Force has been formed which has the responsibility to execute the assessment of the teacher education programmes. Although VLIR and VLHORA have a common protocol and procedures for assessing higher education programmes since 2004, the implementation has often proved to be slightly different. As a consequence, for this assessment every step in the procedure had to be evaluated on how to design it best which led to carefully designed procedures and a process which was relatively *fit for purpose*, a principle laid down in the ENQA European Standards and Guidelines⁹.

Recently, VLIR and VLHORA established a common structure VLUHR (Flemish Higher Education Council) which takes over the responsibility of VLIR and VLHORA in the fields of quality assurance. The assessment of the post-graduate teacher education programmes was an interesting practice to build upon at the moment of integration of the two quality assurance units.

Cooperation between quality assurance units and institutions

In preparation of the external assessment, VLIR and VLHORA gathered a working group of 15 representatives of the institutions¹⁰, a representative of the Flemish Government and the project managers of VLIR and VLHORA. This working group was one of the main tools to create ownership and trust among all involved programmes, especially the programmes from centres for adult education, who were, as stated earlier, less familiar with the procedures of the external quality assurance system in higher education. The working group met several times in 2008 and 2009 to adapt the assessment framework and procedures which VLIR and VLHORA were using for higher education programmes. Several meetings were necessary to get to know each other better and to find a common vocabulary. Indeed universities and university colleges on the one hand and centres for adult education on the other hand have had for long a completely separate legal framework and did not work together that often until recently. So a certain time and number of meetings were needed to adapt the language used by VLIR and VLHORA to match it with the language used by centres for adult education. While for the Government and the quality assurance units it was important to develop a common assessment framework which would allow to assess the programmes from the different types of institutions, institution representatives defended their values and perspectives. Representatives from centres for adult education focused on the importance of practical applicability of the results of the teacher education programme and

⁶ www.vlir.be

⁷ www.vlhora.be

⁸ Floris Lammens and later Chara Baeyens within VLHORA and Pieter-Jan Van de Velde within VLIR

⁹ European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area 2009, Helsinki, 3rd edition, http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_3edition%20%282%29.pdf

¹⁰ 5 representatives from the universities, university colleges and centres for adult education respectively.

cooperation with secondary schools. They also defended the stance that internationalisation and an extensive student counselling were not requested from their type of institution. Representatives from universities and university colleges on the other hand defended the importance of discipline specific didactics, contents based on scientific research and internationalisation.

As soon as the working group finalised its preparatory work, the protocol for external assessment of teacher education programmes (including an assessment framework and all relevant procedures) was approved by all parties involved in October 2009 (not only VLIR and VLHORA, but also the Steering Group Adult Education, which had been established at the same time of the preparation process and represents the centres for adult education to the Flemish Government).

Next to the involvement of all types of institutions in the development of the assessment framework, the programmes also have a say in selecting members for the peer review panel. This is a key feature in the assessment process to raise the ownership of the process in all involved programmes.¹¹

After the panel agreed upon the programme reports drafted by the panel secretaries, each institution received its own programme draft report only. The institutions were asked to react to factual inaccuracies, and could also make comments of a substantive nature. The panel discussed the programmes' reactions to the draft programme reports at a second editorial meeting. Next, the institutions received the final version of their programme report, together with a response from the assessment panel explaining why they have or have not taken into account the programmes' comments; they also received the general conclusions of the assessment panel. After the editorial meetings, the project managers completed the assessment report with a policy oriented chapter for the report and, finally, the report's formal submission to VLUHR by the assessment panel, and the publication of the report.

Cooperation between institutions

The 2006 decree and the expertise networks which were established consequently, created new dynamics for the cooperation between institutions. Before, the three types of institutions offered a different kind of degree and worked separately with their own more or less marked out audience. The new decree established a common degree for the institutions and thereby created a mixed pool of students, especially for centres for adult education, who have students with all kinds of educational and professional backgrounds. Now all programmes lead to the same degree, there are more possibilities for the institutions to work together. Universities and university colleges share their expertise on (external) quality assurance and discipline specific didactics with the centres for adult education. Institutions also share their expertise on programme and staff development and on cooperation with secondary schools. Another example of positively evolving collaboration between institutions because of the expertise networks is the sharing of infrastructure, e.g. libraries.

Groups of centres for adult education formulated a common structure to organise their teacher training programmes, which led to more transparency. Unfortunately this fixed structure also led to less flexibility in creating a cycle of continuous innovation and quality improvement for some institutions. The assessment panel suggests that this is not a trade off and an innovating programme also benefits from a transparent common structure. There are some examples where institutions created their own innovating quality cycle between the boundaries of that common structure, showing a dynamic that led to collaboration and ownership of their own high standard teacher training programme.

A remarkable lack of cooperation between institutions pointed out by the assessment panel is in the area of recognitions of prior (experiential) learning. Because procedures are not applied equally and communicated with students, the recognition of these competencies differs between institutions and more cooperation is necessary to avoid inequalities.

Several smaller programmes face a combination of challenges which make it difficult to offer the required quality. Limited resources lead to small part-time positions and difficulties to guarantee a sufficiently broad spectrum of competences. As a result it is difficult to follow up (international) developments related to all

¹¹ Beckers, M., Cortvriendt, D., & Van den Bosch, P., 2011, 'Critical friends or independent critics', paper presented at the 6th European Quality Assurance Forum, Antwerp, Belgium, 19 November. At European University Association <<www.eua.be/Libraries/EQAF_2011/BS_IIIb3_Cortvriendt.sflb.ashx>> [18 December 2012]

aspects of teacher training, guarantee professional development of staff and develop quality assurance. Also providing the necessary accommodation and a well-developed library are challenges which aren't easy to meet for many institutions. Nevertheless, some small scale programmes manage to overcome all these challenges and offer high quality education.

The assessment panel sees a need for intensified cooperation between different institutions to develop real expertise centres for teacher education which can offer initial teacher training, as well as lifelong professional development initiatives for teachers. Although the expertise networks of programmes have had a positive impact on cooperation and quality development, the panel finds these networks still too loose to create the necessary scale and cooperation to offer each type of student the best possible teacher training.

Cooperation within institutions

The assessment panel not only focussed on the cooperation between institutions, but also the cooperation between teacher trainers within programmes sometimes was a point of discussion. Organisational factors as small part-time positions, different teaching hours, several locations, and a lack of collaboration culture, sometimes showed a split up programme where every teacher trainer is responsible for his or her own part of the programme, but the students have lack of the bigger picture of their training programme. This means that competencies are not sufficiently integrated through the whole programme, e.g. learning how to create a series of lessons, fitting these series in a wider curriculum, the contribution of the own teaching subject in the whole educational system, thinking about the used educational concept and underlining theory.

The assessment panel also pointed out the missed opportunity to reflect with the students on their own education programme on a meta level. If more emphasis is on the educational concept of the programme, students can enquire this example to transfer it (or not) to their own educational practice.

Conclusions and questions

The complex field of teacher education in Flanders shows a high number of programmes, offered by different types of educational institutions. Scale and quality differ strongly. Expertise networks have been developed to create more cooperation between educational institutions and to increase quality. The efforts of these networks have clearly delivered positive results, but cooperation should be further intensified to create genuine expertise centres in teacher education.

The first external assessment of all Flemish post-graduate teacher education programmes has been also an interesting exercise in itself, as it was a common project involving the different types of educational providers and being a first common assessment carried out by the QAU of VLIR and VLHORA. It offered the two quality assurance units a good opportunity to streamline their procedures and their way of working, preparing for the merge of the two units into the VLUHR which started at the time of this external assessment.

Discussion questions:

- Can cooperation between institutions lead to a good division of labour, and which conditions should be fulfilled to reach this?
- Is scale enlargement and cooperation in expertise networks necessary to improve quality in teacher training programmes?

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Annex 1: Assessment framework¹²

Theme 1 Aims and objectives of the programme

Aspect 1.1. Level and orientation of the programme and discipline-specific requirements

Theme 2 Curriculum

Aspect 2.1. Correspondence between the aims and objectives, and the curriculum

Aspect 2.2. Requirements for professional and academic orientation

Aspect 2.3. Consistency of the curriculum

Aspect 2.4. Size of the curriculum

Aspect 2.5. Workload

Aspect 2.6. Coherence of structure and contents

Aspect 2.7. Learning assessment

Aspect 2.8. Admission requirements

Theme 3 Staff

Aspect 3.1. Quality of staff

Aspect 3.2. Quantity of staff

Theme 4 Services

Aspect 4.1. Facilities

Aspect 4.2. Tutoring

Theme 5 Internal quality Assurance

Aspect 5.1. Evaluation results

Aspect 5.2. Measures for improvement

Aspect 5.3. Involvement of staff, students, alumni and the professional field

Theme 6 Results

Aspect 6.1. Achieved learning outcome

Aspect 6.2. Study progress

¹² VLIR-VLHORA, Handleiding Onderwijsvisitatie Specifieke Lerarenopleiding, p.82, Brussels, October 2009, <http://www.vlir.be/media/docs/Lerarenopleiding/VLIR-VLHORAHandleidingSpecifiekeLerarenopleidingen-oktober2009.pdf>