External quality assurance and accreditation: Is there still room to think outside the box?

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Abstract

In 2005 a formal accreditation system was added to Flanders' long-standing external quality assurance system. This turned the external reviews from a fruitful exchange of ideas among peers into a high stakes assessment. Many feared that this would ruin the improvement oriented atmosphere of the peer reviews. The University of Antwerp reflects on four years of experience and presents a few cases. The examples show that – depending on circumstances – the prospect of gaining or losing a formal accreditation can either have a stimulating or paralyzing effect on programme directors and staff in their preparation for a peer review. The University of Antwerp has added new elements to its internal quality assurance system in order to provoke the stimulating effect of accreditation and promote creativity.

Introduction

Flanders has a rather long-standing tradition of external quality assurance through peer review, introduced by the Flemish Interuniversity Council in 1991. It still functions today. However, when the Bologna ideas found their way into Flemish legislation, an accreditation system was added. Although the peer review system itself changed only slightly, the addition of a judgment about accreditation turned the peer review from a rather friendly and fruitful exchange of opinions about quality into a high stakes assessment.

At the introduction of the accreditation system in 2005 many feared that this transition would ruin the improvement oriented atmosphere of the peer reviews. Now, after four years of accreditation experiences, we start to get an idea of the implications of the accreditation process. Were these fears justified and did accreditation limit the freedom of speech of programme directors and peer reviewers? Or did accreditation have an unexpected positive effect in enhancing quality assurance officer's and programme director's readiness to find creative solutions to diagnosed problems?

In this paper the University of Antwerp reflects on these questions and presents a few cases with experienced effects of the accreditation process.

Have inspiring guidelines become impeding regulations?

In the early nineties, a huge part of the positive effect of the first round of peer reviews was due to the novelty of this external quality assurance system. Programme directors and staff were alerted by the announcement of a peer review and put much effort in their preparation. Although quality of education has naturally always been of concern to all people involved in it, this was the first time that programme staff had to systematically reflect on the quality of their programme on the basis of guidelines and standards. While some standards were obvious for all – for instance sufficiency and quality of academic staff – others caused a bit of a commotion, such as the presence of an evaluation system for the quality of education. Also, the review standards drew attention to the philosophy behind an educational programme, its goals and the translations of these goals into the programme and its course units. Much of this was apparently present, but only implicitly. Often there was a general understanding among staff of these assumptions, but for most programmes these were not written down or made explicit.
The effect of all this was that programme directors and staff and also the university management prepared themselves very thoroughly, evaluated their own functioning and anticipated on strengths and weaknesses the peer review panel might detect. The explicit guidelines and standards of the peer review inspired them to a new perspective on quality. It widened their box of quality thinking in education, so to speak.

Now, almost 20 years, two rounds of peer reviews and the addition of a formal accreditation later, has the novelty effect been replaced with something else? In an ideal world programme directors and staff and the institutions as a whole would have internalized this new perspective on quality, adopted the guidelines into their quality culture and reflected on them. Our experience is that – in quite a few cases – the opposite is closer to the truth.

The initial guidelines and standards for quality assurance have over time elaborated into far more detailed listings of criteria. This elaboration was not initiated by external quality assurance institutions responsible for the guidelines and standards, but requested by quality assurance officers, review panel members and programme directors and staff. All those involved in implementing, evaluating and assessing the quality assurance guidelines and standards frequently asked for specifications. Was this out of uncertainty about meanings, eagerness to do things strictly by the book, or sheer lack of creativity to elaborate on and interpret the guidelines and standards? In any case, this resulted in 50 additional criteria and more than 100 points of attention being added to the original 21 aspects of the formal accreditation framework. The consequence is that in many cases when writing up a self-evaluation report, programme directors and staff meticulously follow the guidelines and use them

as a checklist to see if all criteria are either met, described or concealed. Writing up a self-evaluation report thus becomes an unimaginative process that threatens to evolve into a formalistic system smothering all creativity to give unique interpretations to educational quality[1].

The latter actually is what happened recently in one of the arts programmes at the University of Antwerp. The programme staff was very far off from thinking outside the box. In editorial meetings about the self-evaluation report there was no room for discussion whatsoever. When presented with an uncertainty in the interpretation of a criterion or with differences of opinion among the editors, the chair immediately directed the group towards a decision. And when confronted with weaknesses in the programme one was more likely to look for a quick and superficial solution or cover-up than to dig deeper into the cause of the problem. There was an apparent fear to have a fundamental debate about a common understanding of the program's basic principles. In this case, the lack of shared views on the programme makes the formal accreditation system far too threatening to think outside the box. One year prior to the visit of the review panel, time is too short for such a diverse group of opinions to develop a coherent mission and put all noses in the same direction. Had there been no formal accreditation but only a peer review, this team of staff might have grasped this opportunity of a self-evaluation to thoroughly rethink their mission.

Or have impeding regulations become inspiring guidelines?

Not all is sorrow in quality assurance however. At the University of Antwerp there are a fair number of examples where the prospect of gaining or losing a formal accreditation has urged programme directors and staff to take immediate and radical actions to solve problems. In the right circumstances, this necessity often appears to boost creativity.

In one of the University's medical programmes, success rates of first year bachelor students – already low for a few years – dropped dramatically to 11% one year prior to the peer review. Although this programme has always had an enormous intake of freshmen and necessarily makes a selection in the first year, this success rate was surely going to raise the eyebrows of the peer review panel members and was a serious threat to gaining accreditation. Immediate action was to be taken.
First, all staff involved in the programme had to be convinced of the severity of the problem. Academic staff sometimes tends to blame a poor intake for low

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[1] Another implication of the specification of guidelines and standards is that review panels have difficulties to handle this jumble of aspects, criteria and points of attention consistently when reviewing programmes (Report of the committee of the review of the VLIR [Flemish Interuniversity Council] Quality Assurance Unit – May 2009).

success rates and feel the university is better off filtering these students out. However, in this case a closer analysis of success rates proved that even students with appropriate previous qualifications often didn't manage to succeed. This urged staff to think outside the box and consequently the programme director issued various immediate actions: (1) consultation of students to gain insight into the causes of the problem, (2) introduction of more student-centred education, (3) creation of a committee for each learning continuity path in order to improve the coherence among course units and (4) creation of an examination policy in order to conform education and examinations formats with learning goals.

These resolute and appropriate actions and the attitude of staff regarding this issue pleased the review panel members, convinced them that the solutions outweighed the original problem and resulted in a positive evaluation of the programme.

Even if the self-evaluation and the peer evaluation in general is positive and there is no threat to lose formal accreditation, the prospect of gaining a formal accreditation has urged programme directors and staff to find creative solutions and take immediate action with respect to the (anticipated) recommendations of the peer review team. Prior to the introduction of formal accreditation, the self-evaluation and peer review reports were often put in the drawer until the preparations for the next review started. Nowadays programme staff wants to prove to the peer review team and to the accreditation agency that they take their self-evaluation and the peer review's recommendations to heart.

Between the start of the self-evaluation and the application for accreditation there is a period of at least two years. In a growing number of programmes we see that this phase is a very productive one for programme directors and staff to improve their education.

In one programme in humane sciences, for instance, the self-evaluation revealed a good yet very classically constructed programme. Programme staff decided it was time for change. They did not want to implement a few innovations to liven up the programme, but aimed to build a new programme aligned with current didactic and educational insights. So they requested and received a two-day training on the job, focusing on the position of the teacher in student's learning processes, on ways to enhance activity learning and on alternative ways of assessing students. The programme staff as well as the peer review panel was very pleased with the actions taken and the resulting new curriculum.

These two examples show that an important prerequisite for a self-evaluation process to be fruitful, seems to be the extent to which individual academic staff members are able to work together to a common purpose and encourage one another to share opinions, problems and solutions. If such is the case, the process of self-evaluation – with the survival (that is, accreditation) of the

programme in mind – can generate group dynamics among staff, which is an excellent breeding ground for innovative ideas.

Promoting inspiration and creativity

The examples mentioned above might give the impression that all innovations and creation of ideas occur at the level of the programmes. It is true that this is where the heart of the action is. Nevertheless, also at the institutional level the University of Antwerp has been provoked by the implementation of a formal accreditation system to improve its quality management system. In doing so the University of Antwerp wants to create a framework for quality assurance that on the one hand forces faculties and programme directors to engage in quality assurance, and on the other hand leaves enough room for creativity and to accentuate their own priorities.

Establishing Centres for the Innovation and Quality Assurance of Education
Shortly before the implementation of a formal accreditation system, the University of Antwerp set up a new quality assurance system[2]. The most important organizational element in this new system was the establishment of a Centre for the Innovation and Quality Assurance of Education (CIKO) in each faculty. At the institutional level three staff members are charged with quality assurance, and at the study programme level the academic staff is responsible for the day-to-day quality management of the programme. Apart from this, the Education Council considered it necessary to enhance the intermediate, faculty level's capacity for quality assurance and innovation in education in general and more specifically for the preparation of and follow up on peer reviews.
A leading principle in defining the mission and tasks of the CIKOs was to leave room for each faculty's priorities regarding quality assurance and innovation, and not to stipulate detailed listings of duties. Moreover, the CIKOs themselves played a mayor role in the draw up of their collective mission. This in contrast to the aforementioned abundance of criteria and points of attention in the accreditation framework that – if meticulously followed up – leave little room for creative interpretations to educational quality. The Education Council exactly intended to put its trust in the faculties and the CIKOs to do things right and with a sense of creativity.

Standardizing evaluations while respecting diversity
Lecturer and course unit evaluations provide one necessary element of information for the self evaluation process in preparation of a peer review. Furthermore, the results of these evaluations are used for personnel management. In 2003 the University of Antwerp opted for one standardized

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[2] The reason for this was the merger of three universities in Antwerp. These three had been working together for decades and formed a confederation since 1995. In 2003 they officially merged into the University of Antwerp.

questionnaire to evaluate all lecturers and course units. A standardized questionnaire is fast and effective to process, everyone is judged by the same standards and it is possible to aggregate the results on different levels. But diversity is a challenge to deal with when using only one evaluation instrument. Every lecturer has his own preferences, teaching method and communication style. Also faculties and departments tend to have their own corporate culture. The University of Antwerp designed a questionnaire[3] that is able to deal with these diverse characteristics, while it is still possible to process large amounts of questionnaires and benefit from the advantages of one questionnaire that is used institution-wide.

Not only the questionnaire, but also – and maybe more importantly – the procedure to follow up on the results of lecturer and course unit evaluations was designed in a way to (1) leave room for an individual lecturer to put results into perspective, (2) tailor the way the results are processed by the CIKO according to the customs of the faculty and (3) adopt a golden mean between discretion concerning individual lecturer's performances and sufficient openness to discuss necessary improvements of teaching and the programme.

Closing the quality cycle

After a good many years of experience with internal and external quality assurance, it was felt that the gap between receiving a peer review report and starting a self-evaluation for the next peer review was far too wide. The responsibility to follow up on the recommendations of the peer review team was left completely to the programme director and staff. They were never officially urged by central management to act upon the recommendations.

When the formal accreditation system was introduced, the Education Council of the University of Antwerp decided to ask programme directors for a follow-up report on the peer review, in order to close the quality cycle. This report on (planned) actions, their timing and indicators to check improvements is drawn up approximately one year after publication of the peer review report. It forces programme directors and staff to continuously work on the quality of their programme, provides necessary information for university management and can serve as extra information for the accreditation organization if needed. These follow up reports are read by a so called reading committee: the chair of the Education Council, two members of academic staff from other faculties and one central quality assurance officer. They in turn provide feedback to the programme director.

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[3] Mortelmans, D. & Spooren, P. (2005a). Kwaliteit meten en beoordelen. Eindrapport van de valideringsstudie naar het UA-evaluatieinstrument voor opleidingsonderdelen [Measuring and assessing quality. Final report of a validation study of the UA-instrument to evaluate course units]. Antwerpen: Universiteit Antwerpen, faculteit Politieke en Sociale Wetenschappen [faculty of Political and Social Sciences].

Providing educational support
In some cases programme directors and staff need educational support to implement recommendations of the peer review. They can get help from the Centre of Excellence in Higher Education of the University of Antwerp for an in-service training or individual support. Also, the Education Council can initiate training. In 2007 an analysis of all peer review reports revealed that many programmes got remarks about the formulation of learning goals and their alignment with curriculum and examinations. That is when the Department of Education, together with the Centre of Excellence in Higher Education provided four custom-made training sessions for faculties quality assurance officers and programme directors.

Trialing review discussions
Since the peer reviews have turned into a high stakes assessment at the introduction of the formal accreditation system, university management, programme directors and staff feel the need for an even better preparation. Not only in writing (more careful draw up of the self-evaluation report) but also in speech. In order to reveal suspected weaknesses peer review panel members can pose relevant and to-the-point questions that make staff members think on their feet. University staff needs to be prepared to answer such questions.
A trial for the discussions with the review panel was first organized in 2008 for the aforementioned medical programme with a severe problem regarding students' success rates. One month prior to the review panel visit, the chair of the Education Council, the head of the Department of Education and two academic staff members from other faculties acted as a review panel and put programme director and staff on the spot with difficult questions. Although discussions were firm at some points, all involved found this a very useful experience and an excellent preparation for meetings with the peer review team. Almost all programme directors currently preparing a peer review, have requested such a trial.

Final reflection

Returning to the starting point of this paper, does external quality assurance and accreditation leave room to think outside the box?
Yes, I think it does. Programme directors and staff are being creative and do think outside the box while looking for appropriate solutions to perceived problems, anticipating remarks from the peer review team and implementing recommendations. But they can only do so if they form their own ideas of what quality means in their programme. They must let guidelines and standards inspire them to make their own interpretations. If programme director and staff form a true team in which everyone feels safe to ventilate ideas (positive or negative), circumstances are right for creative 'quality assurance thinking'.

If, on the contrary, programme directors and staff immediately seek refuge in the quality assurance guidelines and standards – with al their supplementary criteria and points of attention – to know what is expected of them, there is a big risk of falling into formalism and smothering creativity.

Questions for discussion

1. Given your experiences in quality assurance, do you think general standards for quality assurance are more likely to lead to confusion or to creativity?
   Or, turning it round and given your experience, are detailed criteria more likely to enhance the quality of self evaluations and peer reviews or do they lead to an unimaginative process of meticulously following rules?

2. We are still not sure how to deal with the follow-up on the recommendations of the peer review. On the one hand, we want to keep the self evaluation and improvement process going. On the other hand, we do not want to inconvenience programme directors and staff with further follow-up reports to be written again and again.
   Given your experiences, do you have suggestions to deal with this problem?