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### How does Quality Assurance Make a Difference?

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**Title:** Do EQA and Accreditation really make a difference in Flanders' Higher Education?

#### Abstract:

Due to EQA and accreditation the quality of higher education programmes has increased. At least, that is what everyone hopes. In fact, little or no research is conducted in Flanders to measure the outcomes (impact) of EQA on the quality of higher education.



The outcomes in terms of quality still remain a black box. Our goal is to give a nuanced, but critical, impression of the impact of EQA in Flanders and the added value of accreditation, based on years of experience in EQA. In this paper we distinguish five different categories of EQA- perception: EQA being a calendar, a magnifier, a mirror, a catalyst or a label. EQA, as we believe, makes a big difference when perceived as a catalyst. Based on our experiences the *conditio sine qua non* to enhance the quality remains the willingness of all actors involved in higher education to become increasingly aware that all educational practices are a collective responsibility.



## **Text of paper:**

### Introduction

After 8 years of programme assessment and accreditation and no less than 16 years of external quality assurance (EQA) in Flemish higher education, the quality of the lion share of higher education programmes has increased. At least, that is what everyone hopes or believes, since nobody is really able to prove that the quality of higher education programmes has improved significantly. In fact, little or no research is conducted in Flanders (or elsewhere) to measure the outcomes (impact) of EQA on the quality of higher education. The outcomes of EQA - in terms of quality - still remain a black box that is to be deciphered. To be sure, this paper does not exhibit the ambition to crack this black box. Our goal is to give a nuanced, but critical, impression of the impact of EQA in Flanders, based on years of experience in EQA. Much of the findings presented in this paper are based on our experiences and the feedback we receive from stakeholders.

Of course, VLIR and VLHORA, responsible for the organization of EQA in Flanders with regard to respectively universities and university colleges, monitor in a more systematic way the entire 'quality process'. In order to do so, both VLIR and VLHORA conduct surveys to get a better picture of the levels of satisfaction among the actors involved in the programme assessments. Based on these surveys there are clear signs that EQA makes a difference, as panel members and programme directors clearly state that EQA is of vital importance to assure the quality of the programmes. To put it otherwise, without programme assessment no, or too few, incentives would be present to assure the quality of higher education programmes. At the same time, some respondents state that the overall effects of EQA are rather limited and that with the current multiple finality of EQA (judgement, improvement *and* accreditation) the whole process of EQA is being jeopardized and that it largely fails to foster a quality culture.

It could be argued that the current EQA system assures the quality of the programmes, but does too little to enhance the overall quality of higher education. This raises the question whether or not the current EQA system in Flanders is able to serve all finalities (judgement and improvement on the one hand, and accreditation on the other) in an effective way? And, why EQA has been of minor importance to the establishment of a quality culture in higher education. In short, how can EQA contribute to the overall quality of the higher education programmes and to establishing a quality culture in higher education in Flanders?

### EQA in Belgium

In no case we want to pretend to give a comprehensive answer to the above questions in this paper. Before addressing the impact of the current system of programme assessments and accreditations in Flanders we will try to identify some general tendencies in EQA by comparing the two existing EQA systems in Belgium.

Unlike the EQA system in Flanders, the programme assessments do not run in tandem with programme accreditations in the French-speaking community in Belgium. The presence or absence of accreditation in the Dutch- and French-speaking systems makes it interesting to take a look at whether the two EQA systems in Belgium deliver different outcomes. A comprehensive and comparative study could probably reveal what impact the existence of accreditation has on the overall quality of higher education. Lacking such a study, we can only identify some differences among the EQA systems in Belgium. Important to note is that



in Belgium the jurisdiction over education has been assigned to two linguistic communities. In both communities, however, higher education is funded by public means.

The VLIR and VLHORA quality assurance units (QAUs) are autonomous but embedded bodies, established by the umbrella organizations of the Flemish universities (VLIR) and Flemish university colleges (VLHORA). The current EQA system is characterized by an eight-yearly joint or 'clustered' programme assessment carried out by a panel of peers. The programmes are clustered by discipline and are evaluated by the same panel of peers. While the QAUs organize the EQA, the HEI's are in charge of the IQA of the programmes, which includes writing a self-evaluation report. This report serves as input for the EQA-programme assessments. The assessment report, listing both quality judgements *and* improvement measures, is a public report and is subsequently used as input when a programme submits an application for accreditation by the Flemish-Dutch accreditation organisation (NVAO), which is set up by the Flemish and Dutch governments. All in all; one can distinguish three levels in the Flemish quality process: internal evaluation (which is the responsibility of the higher education institutions), external assessment (organized by the QAUs of VLIR and VLHORA) and accreditation decision (by the NVAO).

In the French-speaking community of Belgium AEQES is responsible for the organization of the programme assessments. The quality process takes place in three phases: the internal evaluation, the external assessment and the follow-up. The internal evaluation culminates in the writing of a self-evaluation report by the programmes that will be assessed externally. For each assessed programme, an assessment panel writes a review report containing a SWOT-analysis along with recommendations. This review report is published on the website of AEQES. The panel of peers also compiles a status report consisting of a 'contextualised exploration' of the programmes including future prospects. The follow-up phase has the objective to anchor the whole quality process. In the six months following the publication of the review reports the programmes provide AEQES with an action plan according to a predefined template. These action plans are published too. At request, an update of the action plan can be published every three years. As mentioned above, in Flanders follow-up is the responsibility of the programmes, and hence part of the internal quality assurance (IQA).

### Perceptions of EQA

What is the very core of EQA? Numerous goals, or objectives, of EQA have been defined, and these may differ from country to country. As mentioned above, in Flanders, EQA has a multiple finality: judgement, improvement and accreditation. We believe that the perceptions, or meanings, attached to EQA can give us a different point of view in order to grasp the core of EQA. At least five different categories of perception (metaphors) can be defined: EQA being a calendar, a magnifier, a mirror, a catalyst or a label.

When EQA acts as a calendar, its main function is to give a programme the opportunity to set up a definite timetable (with the intention ) to monitor its practices. It forces a programme that will be assessed to disengage from its daily routines and (at best) to reflect about practices. In many cases, EQA as a calendar, appears to be a formalistic approach to quality. In fact, there is a risk that EQA will be perceived as a bureaucratic, procedural undertaking, that is doing things properly.

When EQA acts as a magnifier, the panel of peers gives the programme usable feedback on how its quality is perceived. By pinpointing weaknesses and strengths the programme being assessed gets a better picture of its own practices (and is able to benchmark them). Being outsiders, the panel of peers confronts the programme with its practices and offers the



possibility to underpin its strengths and adjust its weaknesses. As a magnifier, however, external views are not internalized.

When EQA acts like a mirror, the external view of the panel members is internalized by the programme. This enables the programme to look at itself in a more systematic way. The panel of peers offers a toolbox to the assessed programme to get a better understanding of its own practices, and in effect, uncover more details concerning these practices. In this way the magnifier approach resembles more of an inspection, while the mirror approach fosters critical self-reflection.

When EQA acts as a catalyst the programme being assessed becomes an identity, a unit that experiences a feeling of togetherness. This may be the result of having a meeting with all the actors involved and hear each other talk about the way the programme takes (or should take) form. All actors involved become increasingly aware that all educational practices are a collective responsibility. A shared vision on quality and education can finally emerge, which is the very prerequisite of a quality culture.

Finally, when EQA acts like a label the assessed programme will focus on the visibility of its education. EQA, in sum, becomes a means to inform society about the quality of the programme being assessed. This may also contribute to the amount of trust stakeholders have in higher education. Danger exists that by putting emphasis on EQA as label it overshadows other meanings of EQA. EQA, in that case, becomes instrumental for the creation of rankings.

No doubt, one can distinguish more categories. Although the above list is not exhaustive, we believe that such an exercise renders a better understanding of the objectives of EQA, such as informing different stakeholders, quality culture enhancement or fostering critical reflection. We also believe that the above categories reflect most of the perceptions present in the Flemish EQA system. Of course, the above notions are ideal types, and in no way meant to be exclusive. In fact, most of the programmes assessed see EQA as a bit of all the above categories. Comparing the perception of EQA in Flanders, we have noticed that many of the programmes have cold feet towards EQA (especially when they are assessed for the first time). Our surveys show that once they are assessed, and certainly if they have been assessed before, the programmes see the benefits of this quality system more clearly and levels of trust between the program, the QAU's and the panels increase.

A very similar observation can be made about the panel members. Based on our surveys, the panel members often perceive their role as being a mirror or catalyst for the programmes in order to foster critical self-reflection and to erect a quality culture. For most panel members the aspect of improvement prevails over the aspect of judgement .

If we take in consideration the different categories of EQA mentioned above, we can conclude that in Flanders, where most of the programmes have been assessed externally two or even three times, EQA has become embedded in the whole cycle of QA. There are clear signs that many of the HEI's and many of the programmes have internalized some of the aspects of EQA and that – in general – they see EQA as a vital element in assuring the quality of the programmes. The idea that in Flemish higher education a kind of quality culture has been established is commonly accepted. However, when we critically reflect on the merits and flaws of the EQA system in Flanders, we dare to say that this looks more like a 'QA culture' than a quality culture as such. Too often, the programmes focus on compliance and have learned to be selective about which information they communicate to make sure that they meet the criteria by which the panels make their quality judgments. Some panel



members, as the surveys show, find it very frustrating that the programmes being assessed are rather reluctant to share information. With regard to that, some programme directors clearly stated that the procedures are overriding the core of what EQA should be: stimulating innovation and creativity. In fact, and maybe because the external assessments are linked to accreditation decisions, many programmes hesitate to agree with the improvement measures listed by the assessment panel. While many programmes are willing to establish a genuine quality culture and identify EQA as being a catalyst for improvement, they often make clear that the assessment panels should merely act as magnifiers, because every listed improvement measure downplays the quality judgements made. In effect, it could be argued whether the current EQA system does too little to enhance the overall quality of higher education in Flanders and whether the multiple finality of EQA jeopardizes the whole process of EQA.

### The rationale of accreditation

There are very different reasons why accreditation has been accepted in the EHEA. We will not discuss them in detail here, but rather focus on its rationale.

One of the arguments not to implement accreditation is the notion of trust. This goes along with the idea that accreditation is useful in contexts where the public confidence towards higher education institutions is average to low, for instance because there's a blooming of new (often private) universities and or university colleges and the proof that they can deliver programmes of a minimum quality is required. In Belgium, there is a long history of public (funded) higher education and traditionally wider society portrays high levels of trust in these institutions.

But why does Flanders still have an EQA system with accreditation? In the first place accreditation provides a way for the government to control a certain quality standard of all the programmes and to make decisions about funding. Accreditation plays the role of 'hard power' that can stop programmes that perform below a certain quality standard, in order to guarantee a basic quality to all stakeholders and society at large. In this regard accreditation can be described as a public statement that a certain threshold of quality has been achieved (or surpassed) by a programme. Subsequently, and since accreditation represents a validation of basic quality, it can also attract international partners, employers and students.

Finally, one can argue that accreditation provides a way for assessment panels to see their findings taken seriously. Although many panel members are rather reluctant about accreditation (especially about the assessment report being used as input for accreditation decision), it provides them with a 'stick', adding a formalistic aspect to their overall 'soft power' to make quality judgements and to formulate improvement measures.

### Does accreditation enhance the quality of the programmes?

So far we have argued that EQA is very useful to assure healthy levels of quality in higher education. A well-constructed EQA system will also provide an efficient framework for programmes and institutions to align their IQA with. And yes, EQA can enhance the quality of the programmes: it can make the actors involved in a programme more aware of the procedures (calendar), it can detect the strengths and weaknesses (magnifier), it can make them reflect on their programme (mirror), and it can even stimulate them to develop a quality culture (catalyst). At the very same time, there is always a possibility that after an external assessment, the actors responsible for the educational practices will not take into account the formulated improvement measures of the assessment panel because they might not



experience a 'sense of urgency'. In relationship with the above meanings of EQA, accreditation becomes simply a label, which risks to paralyze the other objectives of EQA.

As mentioned, the effectiveness of accreditation (in terms of quality) resides in the fact that it ensures that programmes that do not meet the basic quality criteria will cease to exist. In our opinion the mediocre, good and excellent programmes do not - automatically or necessarily - become better due to accreditation. Moreover, accreditation is not an added value to the internal motivation of actors which try to improve the quality of their educational practices. It might make programmes play it safe and curbs innovation and creativity.

To illustrate this, let's have a look at the different categories of EQA that we have defined. If the label of accreditation becomes predominant, the consequence is that, when writing a self-evaluation report for example, a programme will use the assessment criteria as a 'checklist' to see if they are met or not. This results from time to time in a very formalistic, procedural language that covers more than it uncovers. This also entails a strategic way of writing. One will only provide that information which is instrumental for compliance. Writing a self-evaluation report, in such a case, becomes an unimaginative process, a compulsive 'stimulation' that exterminates the prerequisites of developing a genuine quality culture.

In sum, the biggest threat in an EQA system enveloping accreditation is a one-sided focus on the process of QA itself instead of on the educational practices that make up the quality of higher education. It may not come as a surprise that in some cases EQA will be increasingly perceived as the 'assurance of the QA'. To put it otherwise, with the stick behind the door of accreditation EQA risks to become a self-referential (instead of a self-critical) endeavor.

### Conclusion

In Flanders, EQA is basically perceived as a valuable, even vital, element for the quality of higher education. The programmes as well as the panels perceive EQA as more than just a calendar or a label. But, some actors involved might be disappointed, because the current EQA system focusses too little on the enhancement of the overall quality of higher education in Flanders. Innovation and creativity are often annihilated by one-sided perspective on EQA. As argued, accreditation may, in some cases, have the tendency to limit the pursuit of a quality culture.

Based on our experiences in EQA the *conditio sine qua non* remains the willingness of all actors involved in higher education to become increasingly aware that all educational practices are a collective responsibility. EQA, as we believe makes a big difference when perceived as a catalyst, when it stimulates internal motivation. So the challenge is to convince higher education institutions that EQA is only meaningful when it is more than a calendar or a label, which is difficult when the whole system of EQA is more and more identified with 'hard power'. Also panel members should be asked to focus more on the need for developing a quality culture. Many panel members are very eager to formulate improvement measures, but have no guarantee that the programmes take them seriously. The fact that in the French-speaking part of Belgium follow-up reports of the programmes are being made public could be good starting point for focussing more on quality culture.



### Questions for discussion:

- We mentioned EQA in different roles (calendar, mirror, magnifier, catalyst, label)? What can be other roles or metaphors? What do you think about the proposition that EQA without accreditation can also have the role of a label?
- Do you agree that accreditation curbs innovation and creativity? Or are the merits of accreditation still bigger than it flaws?
- Until now, there are no Institutional reviews or institutional accreditation in Flanders. Does the relation Quality – EQA – Accreditation differ in a system with institutional review and or accreditation?