



APPRECIATIVE APPROACH

A MINDSET FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE



NVAO



INTRODUCTION

NVAO's Appreciative Approach embodies the way NVAO Flanders nourishes quality cultures and institutional autonomy. It is a mindset, an underlying philosophy or attitude that characterises both the design of quality assurance procedures and their execution. NVAO asks you as a panel member to propagate this Appreciative Approach when playing your role in an assessment procedure.

“NVAO's Appreciative Approach, a mindset for quality assurance”

PREPARATORY PHASE

Panels are asked to take the perspective of a higher education provider (HE provider) and take into account its context while carrying out assessment procedures. Substantive choices are not questioned. Panels start their task with an initial appreciation of the institution or programme, i.e. a first impression that is directed to identifying strengths and successes on the one hand and areas that deserve closer examination on the other hand. Panel experts explore the context; there is no judgement during the preparatory phase.

EXAMINATION PHASE

During the site visit, panels engage in dialogue with the HE provider and share their findings in order to gain a common understanding of the quality level. To that end, they acknowledge the successes of the HE provider and give it the opportunity to further present these strengths and highlight them. They appreciate the work that has been done and name the distinctive features that turn the activities into good practices.

Furthermore, panels start to examine what is unclear or appears to be a point of attention, in order to gain more understanding. It is important that they involve the HE provider in this process so that

both parties agree on the situation and what elements should be reworked to make the result stronger. Panel experts can share ideas in order to challenge the HE provider, to stimulate reflection and inspire it, but they never prescribe how things should be done. In the end, it's the HE provider who decides on how the goals will be reached. A meet-and-greet serves as an icebreaker; it determines the setting for the interviews that are conducted during the site visit. All stakeholders that will meet with the panel are invited and they can get acquainted with the panel members.

Each interview starts with an open, appreciative question, which is at the same time non-directive, aimed at reflection and looking for opportunities. It should also be safe to answer (no 'wrong' answer possible), which can be reached by referring to the personal perspective of the person addressed. Questions that could provoke a defensive reaction are avoided at all time.

REPORTING PHASE

NVAO's Appreciative Approach does not contradict a critical-inquiring attitude. Appreciation does not lie in the mere mentioning of positive elements. The appreciation is reflected in the report by exposing opportunities for further quality enhancement and by advising the HE provider on embedding and anchoring good practices.

The assessment report must not come as a surprise as the panel and the HE provider shared their insights during the examination phase. It holds up a mirror to the HE provider, returns the story that was told in the self-evaluation report and during interviews, and supplements it with leads that induce further reflection without being prescriptive on how things should be done.

Only at this stage, the panel works towards a holistic judgement. The QA system is based on trust: it is assumed that basic quality is present at all levels. Therefore, the report does not need to substantiate positive findings. However, it explains how the panel gathered evidence regarding unclear aspects or points of attention. The judgement is positive as long as the HE provider has a clear view of its own functioning, thereby being able to identify strengths and challenges, and having the necessary means to remediate.

It displays a common thread: what did the panel look for, what evidence came up, which questions remained and how does the evidence corroborate the judgement? The report gives an insight in the choices that the HE provider has made and how they 'colour' in the eyes of the panel.



IN CONCLUSION

NVAO's Appreciative Approach takes into account the specific context of an HE provider. It respects the autonomy of the HE provider and avoids the use of checklists. Panels are asked not to instruct but inspire. Flexibility is a key feature when designing assessment procedures in an appreciative way.



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