



PAPER

Understanding the context - creating evidence through an appreciative dialogue

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ABSTRACT

On September 1, 2019, the new Flemish system of quality assurance (QA) was launched. QA in Flanders took two major steps forward. Assessment of individual programmes made way for a review at the institutional level. Besides, the traditional focus on compliance made way for NVAO's Appreciative Approach.

The rethinking of the QA system was used to reduce administrative burden and to bring ownership of quality to where it belongs, within institutions. The tailor-made approach maximises the impact of the context of the institution or programme under review. An exploratory site visit, postponement of judgment, and in particular the appreciative dialogue between panel and institution enable the panel to carry out the review while taking the perspective of the institutional board or programme responsables. The insights that are shared and agreed upon by panel and institution/programme, are considered by both parties as valid evidence, allowing for qualitative descriptions of aspects that go beyond facts or figures.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT - CREATING EVIDENCE THROUGH AN APPRECIATIVE DIALOGUE

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Between 2015 and 2017, NVAO's pilot on institutional review laid the foundation for a new Flemish quality assurance (QA) system. After nearly three decades of assessments and accreditations at programme level, the pilot focused on two important elements. First and foremost - following a similar evolution in other European countries - Flanders experimented with QA at the institutional level. Institutions increasingly expressed a wish for more autonomy regarding the QA process. They indicated that QA at programme level had become a bureaucratic exercise that yielded little added value. Panels were looking for flaws and defects using a checklist with criteria and they requested documents and data that were not available as such in the institution and therefore had to be created specifically for the external assessment. This resulted in bulky files and self-assessment reports, laced with jargon - often written with the help of the institutional QA services - that were miles away from the daily practice of teaching staff. Therefore, the external QA could count on little support among teaching staff: Why is all of this necessary? Why do we have to account for ourselves in this way? And why external QA cannot be in line with daily practice in the institution? All why questions... I will get to that later.

Over the years, extensive experience and know-how in QA has been built up within the 18 Flemish universities and universities of applied sciences - all being public institutions with a long history. While institutions could optimally attune their internal QA to their identity, context and educational vision, external QA continued to have a fairly rigid structure that did not evolve much. The institutions asked for more autonomy regarding QA and the associated accountability. In addition, they were all able to present a good track record: 95% of the programmes passed the external quality assessment without any significant problems, although there were of course recommendations.

To a new QA system for Flanders

In order to expand the autonomy of the institutions and to recognise the responsibility that institutions had assumed over the years, an assessment at the institutional level was considered: the institutional review.

The original idea of carrying out assessments at both institutional and programme levels received little support from the institutions. It would increase the workload considerably while at the same time little could be done to meet the shortcomings of the system. The institutions asked for trust in order to be able to take control of the QA of programmes themselves. The programme accreditations were suspended pending a pilot with institutional reviews and the development of a new QA system.

All stakeholders - institutions, students, umbrella organisations, government and NVAO were extremely positive about the outcomes of the pilot on institutional review. Based on this, the new Flemish QA system has been developed, and transposed into a new decree. One year ago - in September 2019 - the new QA system came into effect.

The idea of giving institutions more autonomy in confirming the quality of their education was aimed at putting the responsibility for educational quality back where it belongs in the first place, i.e. as closely as possible with the teaching practice of the individual lecturer. After all, QA is not an isolated process, it should not be an additional task or activity for staff, because many of them are intrinsically motivated to strive for quality. Support for QA involves recognising the importance of quality, and responsibility for quality goes hand in hand with accountability. By supporting

teaching staff in their pursuit of quality and confirming what is often already present as strengths, quality can be discussed more easily, and efforts can be made to promote a quality culture. The lecturer is recognised as the expert for his or her field who can make choices to optimally convey the learning content. The administrative burden, or at least the perception of administrative burden, is decreasing because the QA activities are experienced as meaningful when they are adapted to the context of the institution or programme.

NVAO's Appreciative Approach

NVAO has tried to shape the new QA system for Flanders on the basis of this philosophy, this mindset. This is reflected in three priorities: (1) putting our trust in what exists, (2) identifying success factors and good practices rather than looking for flaws or defects, and (3) come to a shared insight into how the quality can be further enhanced. The right focus, which shows maximum respect for the context of the institution or programme, will enable the panel to create added value. The focus on what goes well facilitates the open dialogue. We have defined this mindset as NVAO's Appreciative Approach. The word 'appreciative' does not mean that the approach is soft or that there cannot be room for critical examination. We do, however, always ask our panels to conduct the assessment with great respect for the context. Panels leave out their personal visions and perspectives as much as possible and in a first - exploratory - phase they try to empathise with the perspective of the institution or programme under review.

As a panel member rightly pointed out during the pilot on institutional review: you can only dig one layer deeper than the layer that is presented by the institution. The more an institution exposes itself and identifies challenges in addition to strengths, the more a panel can create added value during the dialogue among peers. During the pilot, 18 institutions - 5 universities and 13 universities of applied sciences - were reviewed. NVAO's Appreciative Approach has proven to be effective in all cases, although at some institutions it worked better than at others. This is due to a variety of reasons. An important element is the organisational culture in the institution: is the institution very hierarchically organised and does it adhere to formal manners? Are people sceptical about the external QA process or do they believe in it? Do they want to learn from the exercise? Some institutions were so convinced of the Appreciative Approach that they already applied it internally during their preparation for the institutional review. And last but not least: does the panel manage to master the appreciative mind-set, even when it has to question more critical issues?

The appreciative dialogue

Those critical questions are needed. They can be used to clarify things or to explore weaker aspects that can be reinforced. During the first phase of the procedure panel members postpone their judgement and familiarise with the context of the institution. The questions are therefore mainly aimed at clarification and in-depth study. What does a particular choice mean in practice, what are the implications, strengths, and challenges? How is the policy implemented and how can people identify with it? Why-questions are usually not the questions we like to ask. They very often evoke a defensive reaction from the other party. We do not want to question substantive choices, but we do want to thoroughly check whether the substantive choices have been converted into a policy that works in practice. It is not a problem at all that some elements are challenging or even unsuccessful. On the contrary, as long as the institution learns from what goes wrong, we are convinced that they will provide the necessary remedies, reactive to the situation in question, but also proactive towards the future. We always tell the institutions that they will not be penalised if they communicate openly about weaknesses or challenges. As long as they have a clear understanding of what could be improved through change and they foresee the appropriate follow-up, there is no problem whatsoever.

Exactly that aspect is crucial. The panel does not have to highlight every weakness or check every policy against a list of criteria. If it finds an agile institution that develops, implements, analyses, and adjusts its strategy, the panel can put its trust in the remedial capacity of the institution. What

is important is that the responsables of the institutions or programme are able to show a profound self-awareness, that they know what is happening and that they are aware of strengths and weaknesses and communicate about them openly. We would rather hear how a challenge is approached by trial and error than facing an image that everything is running smoothly, an image that does not correspond to reality.

So, we focus on what is going well. When the dialogue can take place in the right atmosphere, challenges arise naturally when the panel digs deeper. The panel acts as a critical friend who does a lot more than just patting the institution on the back. It can hold up a mirror to the institution while engaging into the dialogue.

A panel of peers

To be credible, the selection of panel members is of utmost importance. The institution must recognise and accept the panel members as true peers. Representatives of the institution must have faith in the people sitting opposite them. Institutions and programmes are invited to suggest suitable panel members and where possible we try to follow those suggestions, naturally taking into account the required expertise, a balanced panel composition and the independence of the panel members.

The strong emphasis on the context implies that in many cases we expect the panels to customise the procedure to the institution or programme. We inform them about their role, about the objectives of the assessment, about NVAO's Appreciative Approach, and about the expectations of the institution. We make use of a combination of a digital learning path and physical training moments with role plays. What we tell in our training is not rocket science. It all sounds very logical, but it does require sustained attention to keep thinking and acting according to NVAO's Appreciative Approach. Not questioning choices, not asking why, postponing the judgment, not ticking off checklists, naming issues, but not immediately giving substance to how the institution should deal with them (this is part of their autonomy). People easily fall into old habits and get on their hobbyhorse. In that case, the NVAO process coordinator needs to intervene.

We no longer use standards and criteria in our assessment frameworks. We do not want to bind or limit the panel or the institution to the topics that may be discussed during the site visit. Both panel members and discussion partners from the institution are experts in education at the institution or within a specific programme. They are therefore best placed to address relevant discussion topics during an interactive dialogue. Some institutions get nervous about this lack of a clear checklist, a clear structure with criteria to prepare for. They do not know in advance what they will be assessed on and they feel that they cannot adequately arm themselves against the hailstorm of questions from the panel. Such a reaction shows that not everyone is equally advanced in their own interpretation of QA, quality culture, and willingness to independently assure the quality of education. Fortunately, it is a reaction that we receive less and less.

Lessons learned from the pilot

Institutions do feel challenged. Much more dialogue and reflection are being conducted in preparation for the external assessment and institutions try to find support for their educational policies from all internal and external stakeholders. As many institutions rightly stated during the pilot, the greatest added value they experience lies in the preparation of the self-assessment report. So, they already experience the added value before the panel steps down. The emphasis that a panel places on various topics in its assessment report confirms or invalidates the institution's analysis from the self-assessment report. Where the thinking of the panel and institution is inconsistent, it is worthwhile to look for the underlying reasons during the interactive dialogue. With that, we hope that the institution can further develop the quality of the learning experience of its students.

During the dialogue, the panel speaks with different groups of people: institutional and / or programme managers, teaching staff, students and alumni, representatives from the professional field, QA responsables and other relevant staff from the support services. In the pilot, we opted to work with a mixed group of discussion partners in which most of these profiles were usually represented for each interview session. The intention was to stimulate mutual reflection and thus create for the institution more insight into their own operations. To this end, safe, appreciative questions were formulated, such as: how do you personally experience element x or y from the educational vision in daily practice?; what do you personally contribute to...?; how is a certain policy implemented or what does it mean to you...? Managers learn at first-hand from teaching staff how they experience the pedagogical project and start to discuss it with each other; students indicate that they do not immediately identify with the fancy words behind the institution's diversity policy and so on. There are no wrong answers because it concerns a personal feeling or opinion. But it teaches the panel an awful lot. It leads to a dialogue that is reflected in the assessment report. The panel does not question the choices but checks whether the institution or programme succeeds in implementing the pedagogical project as it was intended.

To assess this, there is no need for bulky files, kilos of attachments or substantiation with numbers. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. The outcomes of the dialogue lead to qualitative substantiation of the conclusions and recommendations. The self-assessment report is therefore limited in size (depending on the procedure 25-50 pages) and institutions and programmes are asked to limit annexes to the strict minimum. Web links integrated in the file can refer to existing documents such as the educational vision or the evaluation policy. As long as the self-assessment report is self-contained, that is no problem. The question that the institutions must ask themselves is: what does a panel need to be able to come to a substantiated judgement about the quality of our education. The assessment report that the panel returns to the institution is also limited in size.

We have partly abandoned the mixed discussion groups. Not because the mutual reflection did not happen. During the dialogue, students, staff, or management occasionally came up with innovative solutions for challenges that had been around for a long time. This means our assessment procedures contribute to the quality culture within the institution. However, we have noticed that panels also find it important to be able to speak to students alone at some point. We also want to hear the teaching staff separately. The dynamics in such a conversation are different when people can talk freely, without responsible leadership at the table. Although this also depends on the institution.

Conclusion and future steps

The question we sometimes get, is whether our way of assessing is sufficiently robust. We strongly believe it is. The Appreciative Approach really works in Flanders. After nearly three decades of programme accreditation, it was time for something else, a new system with a new angle. The routine has been broken and the return is therefore a lot bigger. We are convinced that also this QA system will not last forever. We keep finetuning it and we keep experimenting. Can we also use quantitative results to gain insight into important trends or evolutions that raise new questions? Perhaps the next step is to use datasets that allow the panel to prepare more thoroughly, based on objective data. This data does require contextualisation (by the institution itself) and we do not want to create an additional workload for the institutions. The data therefore will come from existing databases. In our assessments, we want to work with the sources, numbers, data and documents that the institution or programme itself uses in its day-to-day operations. Nothing (other than the self-assessment report) needs to be created specifically for the assessment.

At the end of the assessment, the gained insights are shared between the panel and the institution or programme. Positive points and strengths are mentioned in the assessment report, but there is no need to substantiate them. Trust is again an important concept here. Points for attention that

the panel has observed are substantiated, without giving substance to how remedial measures should be taken. These points for attention should never come as a surprise to the institution or programme. Observers from the institution may be present during the various dialogue sessions. They act as the institution's memory and have the same information as the panel at the end of the journey. So, they understand where challenges or points for improvement come from and the substantiation provides the necessary contextualisation. Even without numerical evidence, all parties regard the results of the review as valid evidence. The qualitative descriptions of what the panel has encountered - whether or not supplemented with numbers - hold up a mirror to the institution or programme and, together with the recommendations, form the basis for the holistic judgement which invariably constitutes the conclusion of the assessment report.

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Bio

Pieter Caris is Policy Advisor at the Accreditation Organisation of The Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO). He is secretary of the Sounding Board of the stakeholders of the higher education community in Flanders. In September 2015, he was seconded to NVAO for the organisation and implementation of the pilot round of institutional reviews in Flanders and was involved in the development of the Appreciative Approach and the assessments methodologies for universities and university colleges. Afterwards, he co-authored the assessment frameworks for the new Flemish quality assurance system 2019-2025. Pieter specializes in quality assurance at the institutional level, student-centred learning and flexibilisation. Before he joined NVAO, Pieter worked as a staff member in the Educational Support Office of the Faculty of Science at KU Leuven (Belgium) and as Study Programme Advisor and coordinator of the Student Administration Office at the Science Faculty of the University of Antwerp (Belgium).



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