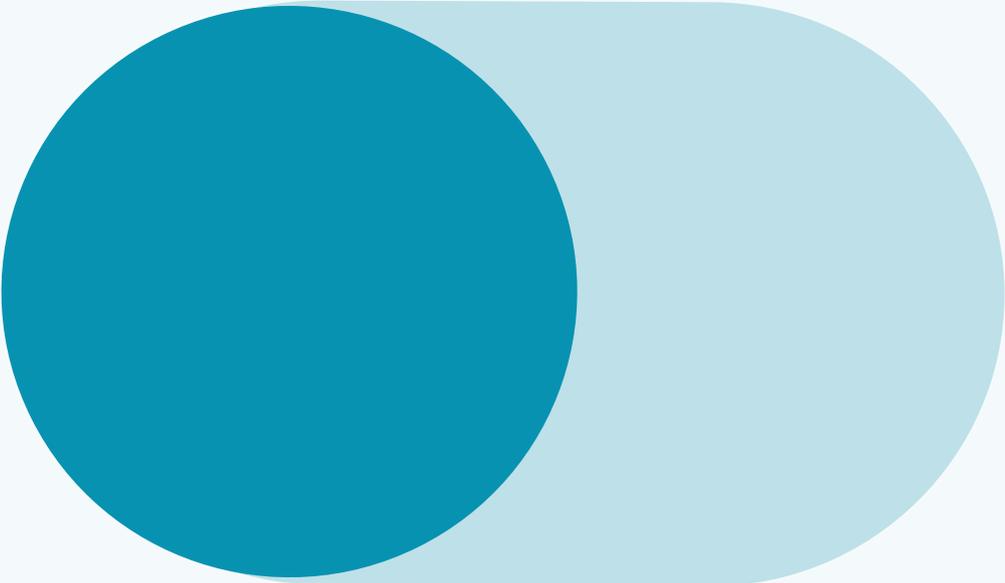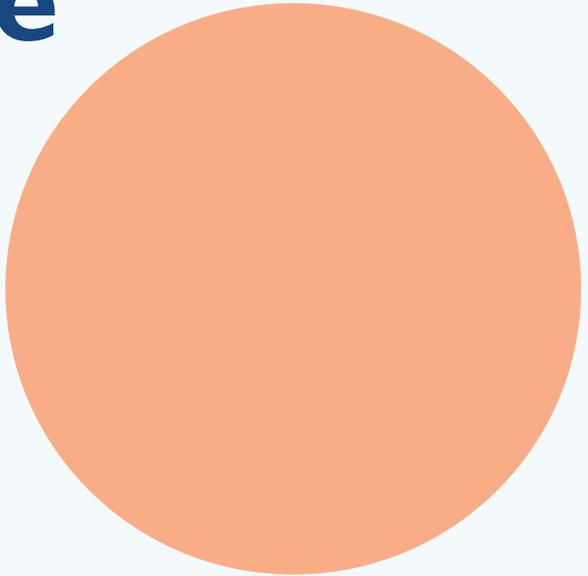# Towards a development-oriented approach to programme assessment:

a Dutch case study

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Introduction

In September 2016, the Dutch accreditation agency NVAO issued an updated Assessment Framework for the Higher Education Accreditation System of the Netherlands which, in line with both national and international developments, placed the notion of trust in the proven quality of institutions and programmes more firmly than ever before at the heart of the Dutch quality assurance system. The track record of Dutch higher education programmes and institutions being an overwhelmingly positive one, as the many hundreds of evaluations over the years had shown, tipping the scales confidently in favour of trust rather than accountability proved a natural and, indeed, welcome development. In February 2018, a new update of the accreditation framework – effective to this day – was introduced, which placed further emphasis on trust in the quality of the Dutch higher education system by, alongside other reforms, allowing for the accreditation of programmes for an indefinite period of time, rather than the six year period stipulated before.

In the "Introduction" to the updated framework, NVAO stresses that, in accordance with its trust-based policy, it not only "aims to endorse staff and student ownership of the programmes and institutions", but also seeks to contribute to reducing the administrative burden of the accreditation process (NVAO, 2018). As a recent research report by the Dutch consultancy firm AEF has shown, there is a widely shared sense among those working in Dutch academia that their workload has been substantially increased in recent years due to the continuous introduction of new rules and regulations (AEF, 2019). This intensified bureaucratic pressure is, of course, not restricted to quality assurance and accreditation, but there is no doubt that for those involved in the accreditation process, given its complexity and what is at stake, it is often experienced as particularly intensive and burdensome. NVAO has responded to this by creating a flexible framework that, in principle, imposes relatively few specific requirements on programmes and institutions, allowing them, for instance, to demonstrate the quality of their educational offering to a peer review panel on the basis of existing documents only, rather than having to write an extensive self-evaluation report. In addition, the 2018 framework introduced a new element: the so-called development dialogue, which offers the peer review panel and representatives of the programme the opportunity to discuss potential improvements in a more casual and relaxed setting, without formal consequences for the outcome of the accreditation process.

The question then arises, in how far the framework's increasingly pronounced emphasis on values like trust, self-confidence and development, in combination with the flexibility and room for manoeuvre it offers, has achieved tangible results. In order to answer that

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question, an article by Sietze Looijenga, managing director of Qanu from 2013 until 2019, provides an instructive starting point. [1]

Increasing trust, reducing the administrative burden

In 2018, about a year and a half after the publication of the 2016 framework, Sietze Looijenga, the then director of the Dutch quality assessment agency Qanu, published an article in which he discussed the notion of trust in relation to reducing the administrative burden of the peer review process (Looijenga, 2018). Looijenga argued that the goals specified in the framework were hardly new, as they had already featured – though less prominently – in previous versions of the framework and numerous discussions among Dutch higher education stakeholders. Furthermore, he signalled that it was far from self-evident that institutions and programmes would avail themselves of the opportunities offered by the framework as a result of the very nature of the site visit as part of the peer review process. In his view, more often than not, a site visit was apt to be viewed in the light of an exam, resulting in a pass or fail issued by a panel whose moods, preconceptions and inclinations needed to be monitored and manipulated as assiduously as possible in order to avoid a potentially disastrous outcome. After all, the repercussions of such an outcome may continue to haunt a programme or institution for many a year to come. This makes the site visit a locus of high tension at risk of focussing on telling the panel what it supposedly wants to hear rather than on what it needs to hear in order to make the audit a valuable experience in terms of development and improvement. As a consequence, preparations are intensified in order to cater for any eventuality that might arise during the

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1 Sietze Looijenga (1963-2019) was director of Qanu from 2013 until his unexpected death in 2019. He was widely recognised as one of the main authorities on the Dutch quality assurance system in higher education.

site visit, resulting in an increased workload for academic and administrative staff, not to mention much redundant paperwork.

The solution Looijenga proposes is to reduce this tension by informing the programme of the outcome of the peer review panel's deliberations before the actual site visit. In this way, the visit should no longer be experienced as an exam, with the programme's future potentially hanging in the balance. Rather, panel and programme will be able to engage in an open, constructive dialogue, focussing on development and improvement rather than accountability. Looijenga argues that this approach is actually much closer to current practice than might be expected. Panel members already form a preliminary assessment on the basis of the documentation with which they have been provided. This assessment essentially answers the question whether a programme does or does not meet the required standard for accreditation. The subsequent site visit serves primarily to verify or add to the information the panel members have already received by consulting the relevant programme stakeholders (i.e. students, teachers, administrators, committees), giving them the opportunity to add depth, colour and detail to their earlier impressions. Only rarely does a panel deviate substantially – and negatively – from its initial, document-based assessment. Why not then, Looijenga posits, go to the full length of announcing the panel's assessment ahead of the site visit, and thereby, in effect, transform the overall visit into an extended development dialogue in an atmosphere of genuine trust?

Of course, for this approach to be effective, it is crucial for the panel members to be provided with sufficient documentation to arrive at a valid and adequate assessment. Looijenga stresses that a programme with properly functioning internal quality control mechanisms should already have the required documents readily available. In addition, rather than write an extensive self-evaluation report, programmes may decide to write a brief addendum to the proffered documentation so as to contextualise it and offer a limited SWOT analysis. The operative words here are "brief" and "limited", in view of the focus on the reduction of the administrative burden. Looijenga ends his article by suggesting that in order to assess the validity of his ideas and to translate them into carefully thought-through procedures, it would be necessary and worthwhile to put them to the test in actual practice.

Pilot project : preparations, site visit and digital challenges

A pilot project started by Qanu in collaboration with Wageningen University & Research (WUR) in December 2019 for the BA and MA Biology programmes aimed to do exactly that.[2] The project's goal, following the lead given by Looijenga, was to assess whether a so-called development-oriented approach to peer review would result in 1) a reduced – actual as well as perceived – workload; 2) a more adequate assessment of the quality of the programme under scrutiny; and 3) an improved contribution to the development of the programme's quality and quality assurance.

The pilot project was based on the following assumptions:

1. The preparation for the peer review process and site visit is based on trust in the quality of the programme, placing the programme in the lead.
2. A lengthy self-evaluation report is not required. Rather, the assessment is based on existing documents, with the panel receiving reading instructions as well as a brief SWOT analysis.
3. On the basis of these existing documents, the panel will announce its preliminary assessment well ahead of the site visit.
4. On the basis of the site visit, a brief evaluation report will be produced, substantiating the panel's assessment of the programme in accordance with the standards stipulated by the NVAO framework and outlining the panel's ideas as to the further development of the programme.

A project team was formed led by the director of the WUR Biology programmes and the Qanu project manager.[3] In addition, a sounding board group was installed in which various stakeholders in the accreditation system in Dutch higher education were represented, including a student representative as well as a senior NVAO official.[4] The latter deserves special mention, as the project specifically set out to explore the leeway offered by the NVAO assessment framework and it was important to be assured of the NVAO's full support. In addition, it was decided to enlist the services of an independent researcher to monitor the process closely, contextualise it in the light of research and (inter)national developments, and offer an objective assessment of the outcome of the project.[5] Finally, all members of the peer review panel declared themselves in agreement with the proposed approach.[6]

The site visit was planned to take place in April 2020, but then Covid-19 intervened, and for a while it seemed

2   We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all those who made this project a reality.

3   Ir. Marjolijn Coppens (WUR); Dr. Alexandra Paffen (Qanu). It was Dr. Paffen who took the initiative for this project and has been the driving force behind it for Qanu.

4   Kees Gillesse (ISO); drs. René Hageman (NVAO).

5   Drs. Bianca Leest (KBA Nijmegen). This article is mainly based on the input and feedback provided by Dr. Paffen and drs. Leest.

6   The panel chair is Prof. dr. Stanley Bruls (UvA). On behalf of Qanu, Dr. Els Schröder acted as secretary to the panel.

that the project might be postponed indefinitely. After the announcement by NVAO that, under specific conditions, online site visits were permitted after all, the panel chair, the WUR representatives, the researcher and the sounding board group were consulted as to the viability of a digital site visit. Three scenarios emerged:

1. The discussion of the preliminary findings would leave no doubt in relation to a positive assessment. In this case, the panel would issue a preliminary positive assessment and the digital site visit would focus on verification and clarification of their findings.
2. The assessment would prove inconclusive, in which case the panel would meet physically with a selection of representatives from the programmes to check if a conditionally positive verdict – and therefore a full physical site visit – might yet be avoided.
3. The panel would issue a negative verdict, in which case a full physical site visit would be required.

The first scenario is the one that was eventually put into effect. In all three of these cases, it was decided that the development dialogue would be postponed until a later date, due to the generally shared sense that a physical meeting would foster a more constructive and open discussion, in line with the goals of the development dialogue.

Transforming a physical site visit into a digital one proved an interesting challenge. As it turned out, careful and deliberate planning is required to make online meetings workable and effective. It proved crucial, for instance, to leave sufficient time between the various meetings, and to have a clear protocol in place to ensure adequate participation for every speaker. Also, a full day of digital meetings proved substantially more fatiguing than a day of regular, physical meetings. Splitting a site visit into two separate, half-day sessions is therefore advisable. A physical site visit is always preceded by a preliminary meeting at which the panel receives instructions from the panel secretary with regard to the procedural aspects of the visit. It became clear that a digital site visit requires detailed attention to conversation management and that the panel members need to be instructed accordingly. How to ask open, development-oriented questions? How to ensure that all conversation partners are allotted their fair share of time? In other words: the panel requires more in-depth, detailed instruction in order to ensure an open dialogue between panel and programme. This is especially true when the digital medium used for the visit does not allow the chair to see more than a limited number of participants on screen.

Prelimnary findings

In how far has this pilot project proved successful in terms of meeting the goals formulated at the outset,

also taking into account the additional challenges posed by the digital format of the site visit?

As for reducing the preparatory workload, the WUR programme director has confirmed that in the run-up to the site visit, this was, in fact, the case. Preparing a brief SWOT analysis rather than a full self-evaluation report, and being invited to provide the panel with existing documentation only, did prove less time and energy consuming than the "traditional" approach. Also, on the basis of the testimonies provided by the representatives of the programme, it is safe to conclude that being informed of the panel's assessment ahead of the site visit made a significant contribution to reducing the kind of counter-productive tension identified by Looijenga.

As for the panel, the initial expectation that the members would need more time to familiarise themselves with the available documentation was confirmed. In future, this might be prevented by providing panel members with more detailed reading instructions and by ensuring that the material is scanned for relevance and readability even more carefully beforehand. The panel was also unanimous in indicating that a more extensive SWOT analysis would have proved helpful, without going to the length of requiring a full self-evaluation report. Both the programme representatives and the panel members concluded that having access to existing documentation only gave a more authentic impression of the nature and quality of the programmes. Quotes from the first brief analysis after the pilot included such statements as "more true view", "just as we are now", "you learn more, you get a better feeling". An additional advantage of basing the peer review process on existing documentation is that it stimulates programmes and institutions to keep their affairs in order, and to reflect systematically on the outcomes and effects of their internal quality assurance procedures.

At the time of writing this article, the development dialogue has only recently taken place (July 2020) and there has not been time to do a full analysis yet. The initial impression here, however, is that both the panel members and the representatives of the programmes were particularly appreciative of the fact that the session was not held immediately after the digital site visit but after an interval of several months. This meant, for one, that the final evaluation report for the benefit of NVAO had already been written, and the programme director was able to invite the panel's input on specific points mentioned in the report. Also, the interval more generally allowed for additional reflection on the site visit, and the dialogue itself, as separate from that visit, took place in a relaxed atmosphere, beneficial to an open and development-oriented exchange of ideas.

On a more critical note, it could be argued that in this pilot project, the only part of the peer review process

that was specifically development-oriented was the concluding development dialogue, so that the site visit itself was experienced by both the programmes' representatives and the panel members as a – more or less – regular visit, albeit one at which the panel's findings were available to the programmes in advance. In that sense, Looijenga's vision of trust-based, development-oriented quality assessment has not been fulfilled yet. The challenge remains to manage a programme assessment in such a way that a site visit may be even more comprehensively devoted to the development and improvement of the programme in question to the extent that a separate development dialogue might ultimately become redundant. However, as this article has tried to demonstrate, useful and productive steps in this direction are already being taken, and there are encouraging signs that several more programmes are preparing to follow the lead taken by the WUR Biology programmes. To do so requires more than a little self-confidence, but if the history of higher education quality assurance in the Netherlands can tell us anything, it must be that such trust in one's own ability to deliver high standards in education is, by and large, amply justified and therefore deservedly recognised by the Dutch accreditation authority in the current assessment framework.

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