Promising practices

University accreditation system: Encouraging a culture of quality in the Netherlands

Country category: Netherlands
Teacher education pathway category(ies): Ensuring quality of ITE programmes
Stakeholder category(ies): candidate teachers; policymakers
Date of publication: March 2018
This case study describes a “promising practice” drawn from an OECD review of initial teacher preparation in the Netherlands on 6-10 March 2017.

The OECD review team – Hannah von Ahlefeld (OECD), Michael Day (University of Roehampton), Kjetil Helgeland (OECD) and Danielle Toon (Learning First) – identified a number of “promising practices” in each country. These practices may not be widespread or representative, but seen in the context of other challenges, they represent a strength or opportunity to improve the country’s initial teacher preparation system – and for other countries to learn from them.

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University accreditation system: Encouraging a culture of quality in the Netherlands

Context

Accreditation, along with assessment and audit, is one of the three main approaches to quality assurance in tertiary education. While audit focuses on internal procedures to achieve established objectives and assessment makes graded judgements, accreditation is an evaluation of the extent to which an institution meets a threshold standard and qualifies for a certain status (OECD, 2008[1]). Quality assurance of universities has received a growing attention in OECD countries for the increase in scale and diversity of tertiary education systems, along with the need for policy makers to show that public funds are spent effectively and that the public purposes for financing tertiary education are actually fulfilled (OECD, 2009[2]).

In the Netherlands, the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) assesses the internal quality assurance of higher education institutions, and the quality of the programmes they provide. There is a mandatory general accreditation process for all university programmes, including ITP programmes. Accreditation reviews occur every six years and are conducted by a panel of peers. Also, institutions can voluntarily apply for an institutional quality assurance audit, which assesses institution-wide quality assurance and quality culture aspects. A positive result entitles to a more “limited” assessment in the accreditation of the programme. Most of the Dutch universities have applied for this voluntary audit.

The limited assessment framework focuses on four aspects related to the substantive quality of the programme (NVAO, 2018[3]):

- **Intended learning outcomes.** The intended learning outcomes tie in with the level and orientation of the programme; they are geared to the expectations of the professional field, the discipline, and international requirements.
- **Teaching-learning environment.** The curriculum, the teaching-learning environment and the quality of the teaching staff enable the incoming students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.
- **Student assessment.** The programme has an adequate system of student assessment in place.
- **Achieved learning outcomes.** The programme demonstrates that the intended learning outcomes are achieved.

NVAO may decide that the programme will be accredited for another six years, that the programme will not be re-accredited, or that the current accreditation term will temporarily be extended within the context of an improvement period.
What does accreditation entail?

The institutional assessment process respects the autonomy of the higher education institution. Rather than focus on a “checklist” of mandatory components, the process evaluates the vision, quality delivery, and culture of improvement in the institution. Institutions must provide evidence of their internal quality assurance and whether the institution is continuously working on development and improvement (NVAO, 2018[3]). The accreditation by the NVAO works in cycles of six years that can be extended to eight – ‘recovery period’ - if the assessment finds that the quality is partially compliant with the standards.

On one hand, the quality assurance “system” aspect of the review evaluates structural features, including aims and objectives, an improvement cycle, periodic evaluations, and systematic monitoring of improvements. On the other hand, the quality “culture” aspect assesses the institution’s ability to create a sustained culture of improvement. Site visits determine whether there is a clear and manifested vision, a shared focus on improvement, leadership, co-operation and self-management (see Error! Reference source not found.).

Box 1. The key questions and standards of institutional audits in the assessment framework for the higher education accreditation system of the Netherlands

“This key question is answered on the basis of four coherent questions that constitute the point of departure for the institutional audit:

1. Are the institution’s vision and policy concerning the quality of the education it provides widely supported and sufficiently co-ordinated, both externally and internally?
2. How does the institution realise this vision of quality?
3. How does the institution ensure that its vision of quality is realised?
4. How does the institution work on improvement?

In the framework, the above questions have been translated into four standards: 1. vision and policy; 2. Implementation; 3. evaluation and monitoring; 4. focus on development.

The four standards constitute a “reflective cycle” on the basis of which the institution demonstrates that all its departments observe a strong quality culture focused on development, and follow up policy results. The quality culture is supported by an efficient internal quality assurance system that continually safeguards the quality of the education it provides.”


Thanks to the work of NVAO, system analysis of ITP programmes showed that primary teacher ITP programmes have made significant progress in order to improve the enrolment of students, the teacher educators, the preparedness of students and the quality culture of these programmes. Further, ITP programmes at the university level showed areas that needed improvement, e.g. the teaching of didactics and more practice related skills (Brouwer et al., 2016[4]).
Why is it a strength?

The OECD review team in its review of the Netherlands on 6-10 March 2017 concluded that the accreditation system is a strength in that it:

- **Encourages a culture of quality and continuous improvement.** The accreditation process encourages institutions to continually improve the quality of the education they provide, rather than only meet minimum standards to maintain accreditation. The process assesses quality assurance systems and an embedded culture of improvement – both are vital in effective higher education institutions.

- **Also evaluates the quality of school-university partnerships.** A key component of ITP systems lies in the capacity to establish strong collaborations between schools and ITP providers. The existence of a quality framework provided by an external agency can help to promote and sustain these partnerships.

How could it be improved?

The OECD review team also noted that:

- **There are few systemic initiatives for sharing best practice and incentivising school participation in ITP.** There is a strong culture of collaboration in the Dutch system, but there are few expectations placed on institutions via accreditation to share quality practices across the entire system. In particular, schools should be explicitly accounted for their role in preparing teachers and initiating partnerships with ITP providers. Moreover, the school inspection process could include the extent in which schools develop strong ITP/professional activities in collaboration with ITP providers.

References


