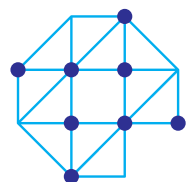
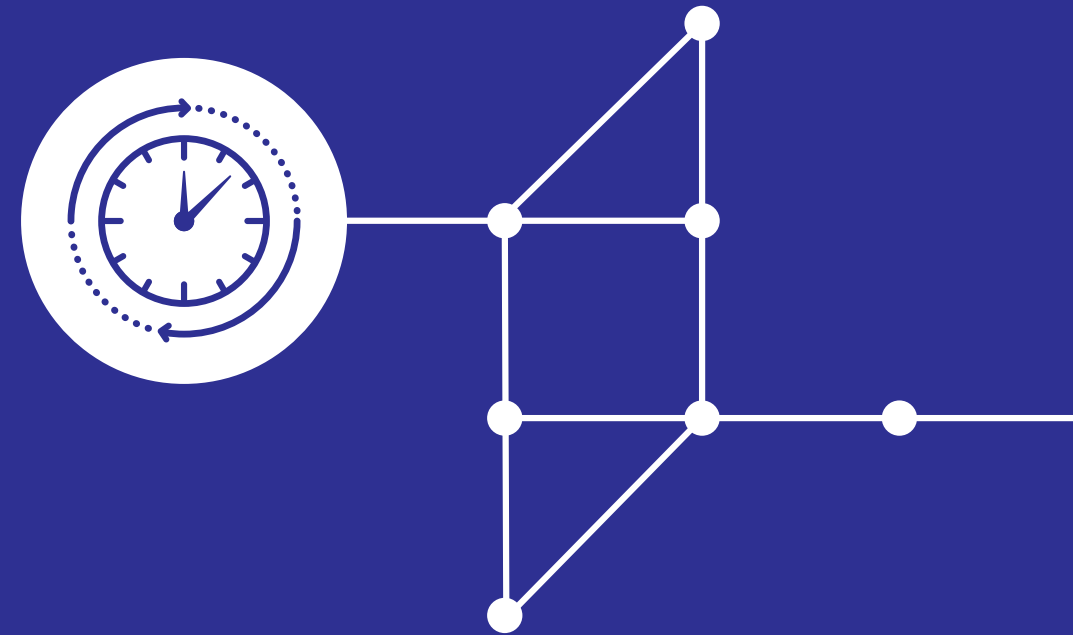


The impact of flexible student paths on quality assurance



Acceleration plan
Educational innovation
with ICT

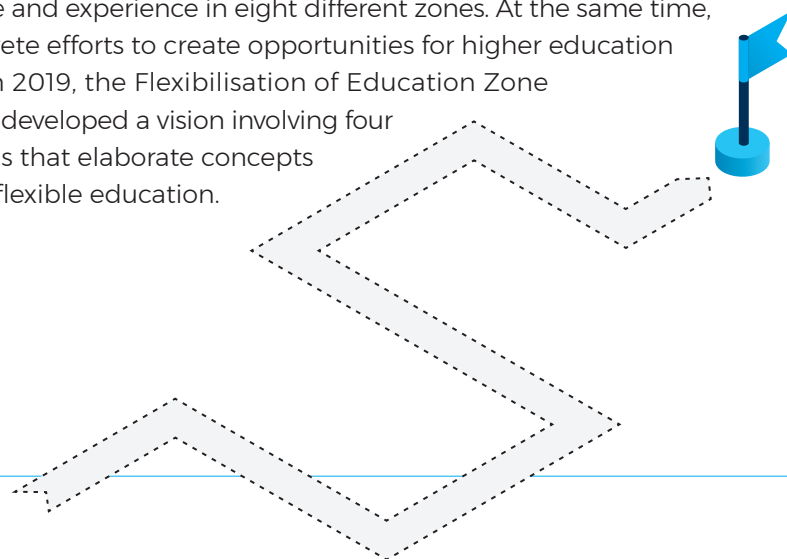
 flexibilisation

The impact of flexible student paths on quality assurance

Introduction

This publication deals with the challenges involved in monitoring and demonstrating the quality of flexible higher education. Flexibility and quality assurance are two pivotal concepts in education and, when considered in tandem, also raise complex questions. How do you assess the value of a diploma when students put together their own curriculum? Who monitors quality if students complete modules at different institutions? How do you demonstrate your quality as a programme provider if you are in the process of innovation at the time of an assessment procedure? These are just a few examples. Finding answers to these kinds of questions is vital because flexible education is the way forward. This is a widely shared view in Dutch higher education.

In the Netherlands, research universities, universities of applied sciences and SURF have joined forces in the field of educational innovation in the 'Acceleration Plan for Educational Innovation with ICT'. In a plan for the 2019-2022 period, they jointly formulate three ambitions: (1) improving access to the labour market (2) promoting more flexible education, and (3) smarter learning with the help of technology. The institutions taking part in the Acceleration Plan will focus on bringing together initiatives, knowledge and experience in eight different zones. At the same time, they will make concrete efforts to create opportunities for higher education in the near future. In 2019, the Flexibilisation of Education Zone (*Zone Flexibilisering*) developed a vision involving four flexible student paths that elaborate concepts of personalised and flexible education.



At your own pace

Students are enrolled in a specific programme at an institution and can complete the programme at their own pace (accelerated or decelerated).

Off the beaten track

This student path fosters mobility across educational and institutional boundaries. Students can follow one or more parts of their programme in another course of study, faculty or institution without any practical obstacles.

MyDiploma

The 'MyDiploma' path abandons the idea of a predefined degree programme. Students put together their own short-cycle programme.

Modular learning

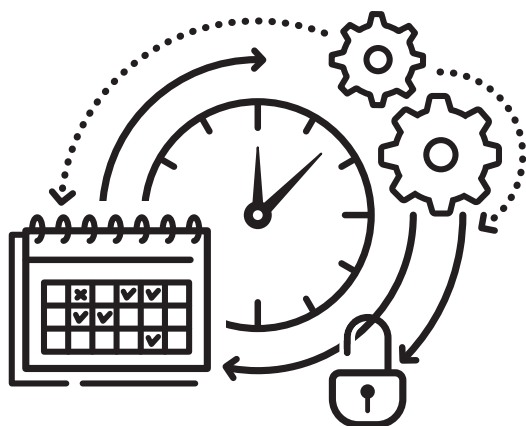
The student signs up for modules instead of a full programme. These modules can be part of a regular programme.

The description of the student paths already indicates that the combination of flexibility and quality assurance places a high demand on institutions and quality assessors alike. Flexibility is associated with personalisation, leeway, adaptability and innovation. Quality assessment, on the other hand, tends to be associated with concepts such as uniformity, frameworks, capturing, securing, consolidating. In this publication, we will take a closer look at ways in which to combine the two and we examine the aspect of 'leeway': how can institutions facilitate the student's need for flexibility within existing **quality frameworks**? What does this require from quality panels? What is already possible in the balance between flexibilisation and quality assurance? What is or is not yet possible? How can we address any concerns?

Structure

The publication consists of three parts:

1. A compilation of cases from practice, arranged by theme and with comments by experts from OCW, NVAO and Evaluation Bureaus (EBs).
2. A future-oriented view, outlining policy developments in the area of flexibilisation of higher education in relation to external quality assurance and legislation/regulations.
3. A brief conclusion in which we summarise our main observations.



Flexibilisation and quality assurance: a compilation of questions and answers

This compilation consists of 14 cases, subdivided into four themes, setting out the possibilities and bottlenecks for making education more flexible within the current legislation and regulations in the Netherlands. The cases were partly compiled by the Working Group on Quality Issues in spring 2020 and partly compiled and discussed at a Dutch national network meeting on 26 November 2020. All case studies were discussed with representatives from a number of Dutch universities of applied sciences and presented to experts in this field working at the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW), the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) and at EBs who helped to formulate possible solutions.

Categorisation of the cases yielded the four themes, each of which introduces the overarching question to the underlying cases:

1. Non-formal programmes offered

2. Non-formal student

3. Valuation after an individual programme

4. General principles for accreditations

The main challenges in flexibilisation of education in relation to quality assurance lie in the development of non-formal education, which is why this compilation focuses on this theme. The themes are closely interrelated, which is why the possible solutions in the various cases occasionally overlap.

We provide a brief description of each theme. For each case, we refer to the student path that is or may be involved in that case and we describe possible solutions. We conclude each theme with a summary of additional comments and suggestions from experts.

Theme 1

Non-formal programmes offered

Institutions increasingly offer education that does not fit within the traditional programme offer. How is quality assurance, both internal and external, ensured for this education? And are there limits to what can be offered?

CASE 1

How do you organise the foundation phase (first year of the programme) within flexible Bachelor's programmes at Dutch universities of applied sciences?

Student paths: At your own pace, Off the beaten track, MyDiploma

How do you justify a flexibly structured foundation phase?

Under the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW), Bachelor's programmes at universities of applied sciences have a compulsory foundation and post-foundation phase. The WHW has a 'may provision' for academic Bachelor's programmes, which means that it is up to an institution to determine whether a Bachelor's programme has a foundation phase. However, if there is a foundation phase, whether compulsory or optional, this phase applies to all programme variants (full-time, part-time, dual).

Part-time programmes in particular sometimes provide different interpretations of the foundation phase. Suppose a programme has four basic modules. The student chooses two of them, which together form the foundation year. Another student may choose two other modules. In short, within this programme the student is free in the choice of modules and the order in which they are followed. A programme must, of course, meet the regulations. However, these regulations can be an obstacle to the flexible organisation of the foundation stage and the needs of the student. How should a programme justify a 'flexibly' structured foundation year during an assessment procedure?

› Possible solutions and guiding principles

This case seems to lend itself to a somewhat 'more flexible' approach. The recommendation – also backed by quality experts – is not to focus overly on meeting the legal requirement now but to deal with it as in the Learning Outcomes Experiment.

There is a certain degree of formal leniency within this experiment, as the government does not want to rigidly enforce existing regulations if that gets in the way of experimentation. Programmes not participating in the experiment are in fact already anticipating legislation and regulations with flexibly designed foundation courses. Obviously, the starting point in general is that programmes must meet existing regulations.

CASE 2

Elective courses: how many ECTS are available for this?

Student path: Off the beaten track

How far does this flexible arrangement extend?

Many programmes offer the student elective courses within the degree programme, which the student can use to deepen or broaden their knowledge. Students often choose a minor as an elective course. They can also compose a personalised package with separate educational units or courses, for example. Students can choose to take their electives at different institutions.

The size of the elective may vary; an elective minor is usually 30 ECTS. Some universities of applied sciences indicate that electives may account for 25%, which is equivalent to 60 ECTS. At other universities, electives may count towards 45 ECTS. What should the maximum scope for electives be in a flexible Bachelor's programme? Where do the boundaries lie?

› Possible solution and guiding principles

Assessment procedures rarely look at these figures and percentages, as the focus is much more on the qualitative assessment of education. Of critical importance here are the final qualifications achieved. These

must be solid and reliable, and therefore require a centre of assessment. If you, as a programme provider, have organised this properly you will know whether the student meets the set requirements. The student path, which the student chooses within the margins provided by the programme, is secondary.

Seen in this light, the concept of 'programme' is therefore also a topic of discussion, including among experts who assess the quality of a programme. Programmes are becoming broader, and indeed this is what students are looking for. On the other hand, there is also a need for recognisability and a clear picture of the end product of a study programme. The boundaries of freedom depend on how the institution presents the programme, the associated qualitative accountability, and demonstrable proof that students meet the quality requirements.

CASE 3

Flexible education, flexible accreditation?

Student path: Off the beaten track

Does the current accreditation system evolve in line with increasing flexibilisation, and if so, how?

Interdisciplinary education is one of the spearheads of academic and higher education in the Netherlands in the coming years. This is expressed in a wide range of innovations and forms of cooperation at home and abroad¹. One example is the increasing number of broad Bachelor' programmes universities are developing, such as Global Sustainability Science, Natural Science and Innovation Management & Philosophy, and Politics and Economics, which prepare students for a modern labour market. Furthermore, UU, WUR and TU/e have formed an alliance aimed at developing a free Master's programme, among other things. This Master's programme will allow students to choose educational modules offered by the three universities involved.

¹ CHARM-EU is a university alliance between Utrecht University, Barcelona University, Trinity College Dublin, Montpellier University and Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest.

We see the same development at universities of applied sciences. An example: Not only does Avans University of Applied Sciences offer educational modules within programmes along with the associated assessment, it also does so across different programmes or even separately from any programme².

The current accreditation system is based on programmes within one domain and one institution. In today's world, where students and the labour market have evolving needs and demand more flexibility, it would seem that institutions must also modernise and adopt other approaches. How do the panels deal with this? What can programme departments do?

› Possible solution and guiding principles

In the examples we briefly discuss here, we are in fact looking at situations outside the framework of traditional programmes. Programme providers are, in this way, preparing for the new quality assurance system, which will probably come into force in 2024. In the current system, modules must always have a relationship with a study programme. This means that modules do not, in themselves, have an independent status. At the moment, complete or partial decoupling of accreditation and education cannot be adequately addressed within existing frameworks. However, in the future – and certainly from 2024 onwards – this will probably be possible. For now, however, it is always possible to submit modules to the examination committee to see if they can be part of an existing programme. An examination committee has the authority to validate a programme unit.

It is also possible to offer courses jointly and have them accredited by different institutions.

² For instance, the Avans Innovative Studio (AIS) and the Avans Multidisciplinary eXperience (AMX). In the future, Avans expects an increase in the offer of courses and assessment not specifically linked to one programme (non-programme-related modules). The new ambition therefore envisages that every student will have multiple interdisciplinary learning experiences.

CASE 4**Open programme
Student is central, personalised curriculum***Student path: MyDiploma***How open may a programme be?**

A programme provider is developing an open programme variant based on a student-centric premise in which the student completes a fully personalised curriculum. This means that there is no pre-programmed educational path. Together with the lecturer, the student shapes the programme and they continuously fine-tune it in mutual agreement. The lecturer monitors coherence between competences and learning and teaching activities as well as the relationship to assessment. Ideally, there should be no pre-programmed final project. In this case, it is about a programme provider's latitude in shaping a curriculum in this way. How much leeway is there and are there any objections? And how desirable is it to seek the boundaries? Developing an open programme variant is quite feasible at academic universities and also seems to fit in better with this type of education. What is the situation at universities of applied sciences?

› Possible solution and guiding principles

At research universities in the Netherlands, the connection between a programme and a clearly defined graduation profile and domain is less clear. This is different at universities of applied sciences, where a programme is usually linked to a domain and has a clear graduation profile. This may make it more difficult to develop a 'curriculum-free' programme. The current WHW stipulates that the educational programme must be defined in terms of 'educational units' and must be included in the Course and Examination Regulations (OER). Furthermore, the WHW indicates the level to which a programme must be described. In any case, a description is needed of the number of study hours/ECTS, the content of the programme, qualifications, learning objectives and the manner of assessment.

For now, a programme provider at an academic university may choose to define the curriculum within the concept of open education. That is,

the description should be as 'open' and 'granular' as possible yet still in line with the underlying vision of the open programme and the framework of the WHW.

This is not yet possible for programmes at universities of applied sciences, but experts indicate that this need has been understood and will be taken into account in the discussion of future amendments to the law.

CASE 5**Quality assurance for short-track courses and master classes***Student path: Modular learning***How do you monitor the quality of small educational units?**

A given university – like other research universities and universities of applied sciences – wants to do more to stimulate lifelong learning. The government offers incentive schemes for continuing and further education of professionals, which means that a broad portfolio of short-track educational units is being developed (master classes, courses, modules). As this is largely non-formal education, it falls outside the scope of the WHW and regular quality assurance. How can we assign external value to these small educational units without creating unnecessary red tape or an increased workload? How can you set up 'lean' internal and external quality control for educational units with a scope smaller than a single subject?

› Possible solution and guiding principles

To the extent that this is not yet the case, it is in any event recommended that an institution include its range of small educational units in its regular internal quality assurance. A 'lean and mean' approach is indeed advisable here – a process not based on a multitude of documents and an intensive evaluation cycle, but a smart approach in which all stakeholders discuss improvement and development with each other on a regular basis. However, it is important to ensure a traceable cycle with a recognisable PDCA (plan-do-check-act). By taking this approach, institutions can prepare themselves for a new system. This may give

institutions the option to assess the quality assurance of a broader range of courses, including smaller and stand-alone educational units, through a test for institutional accreditation. A second option universities of applied sciences should first explore is the classification of currently unaccredited offerings in NLQF³ via NCP (National Coordination Point)⁴ NLQF.

CASE 6

Ownership with faculty-wide modules

Student path: Off the beaten track

How do you assure the quality of interdisciplinary education that does not belong to a single programme?

An institution offers educational units that do not belong to a specific programme. In the OER, these educational units are allocated to a 'random' programme so that they are in any case recorded somewhere. A single examination board responsible for assessing these units is appointed. The question is for which programme should the information and rules concerning assessment, for example, be laid down in the OER, who is responsible for guaranteeing the quality of education and which examination board is responsible for guaranteeing the quality of assessment and for dealing with requests and complaints from students. As we are moving towards greater freedom of choice in curricula and thus more elective modules, this issue has become pressing. At present, the choice is still to link the curriculum to a programme, but because the programme provider and examination board often feel little ownership for such educational units, they risk being overlooked. The focus is on the compulsory, in-house curriculum.

In this case study, the question is whether it is possible to give non-programme related educational units a unique status independent of the current concept of the programme. Is it possible, for example,

³ Dutch qualifications framework

⁴ National Coordination Point Dutch Qualifications Framework

to set up an institution-wide examination board that deals with quality assurance and requests relating to such educational units? Such examination boards could also specialise in this area. In terms of the OER, the question is whether you can associate certain educational units with an examination programme that is not linked to a study programme. What would it mean for accreditation if these educational units were no longer linked to a study programme?

› Possible solution and guiding principles

For the time being, the WHW operates on the assumption of a 'study programme'. The OER and examination board are always linked to that programme, whereas the educational units we are referring to here are NOT linked to a specific programme. Nevertheless, institutions are already free to implement this, even though the required external quality assurance for non-formal education is currently still lacking. Here too, institutions can take ownership by organising this external quality assurance themselves and thus incorporating it into their internal quality assurance. There is nothing to prevent an institution from setting up an external, expert and independent panel to assess the quality assurance of the non-formal programmes they offer.

CASE 7

Putting together an open Master's programme

Student path: Off the beaten track

Who is responsible for assuring a personalised study programme?

This is a hypothetical case currently being discussed in an alliance between WUR, TU-e and UU. A student wants to put together an open Master's programme. They have a curriculum in mind that consists of 40 ECTS from UU and TU-e, and 20 ECTS from WUR. Their curriculum includes disciplines from data science, circular agriculture and social sciences. He wants to do an internship through a start-up programme at UU; thesis supervision will be at WUR but with expertise from UU. This programme affords more leeway than a variation on an existing programme registered with CROHO (Central Register of Higher Edu-

cation Study Programmes) – a combination of disciplines that is also reflected in the thesis and internship guidance. To what extent can credits from other institutions be included? What requirements are there for an examination board in this regard? What boundaries should we observe? How much leeway is there exactly?

› Possible solution and guiding principles

In this example, it is important that one programme provider is the owner. In this case it would appear to be the WUR, since this university is apparently in charge of the thesis track for this programme. In that case, it is the WUR's programme that serves as the benchmark and the full track can proceed as described above. In the case of similar examples, a single programme provider will be fully responsible for the track and the link to the diploma awarded.

What do quality experts say about this topic?

When it comes to non-formal education, the most frequently heard expert opinion is that there are already many possibilities. Naturally, we operate within the framework of the Dutch Higher Education and Scientific Research Act (WHW), but it does not explicitly regulate many issues relating to special programmes or courses offered. This creates opportunities for flexibilisation. A pertinent question in these cases is whether these are individual variations or programmatic patterns tending towards joint programmes. In the case of an individual special programme offer assessed by an examination board affiliated to a CROHO-registered programme, a lot is possible. In the case of larger programmes, there are generally fewer possibilities.

In the WHW, the basic principle is that as an institution, you yourself are the programme provider. Within OCW, it is understood that this basic principle sometimes causes friction and that there are also internal discussions about where the boundaries lie. OCW intends to address this theme next year with the aim of supporting programme providers to utilise the space available to them to innovate the programmes and courses they offer.

Providers of formal programmes who offer very similar programmes and courses may seek common ground in developing non-formal programmes. The point of departure, including by examination boards, is often a full-time programme of study (which then entails restrictions). Although this is understandable in itself, taking learning outcomes as the point of departure makes it easier to develop new personalised student paths and assessment. This is possible, and it is already happening in practice.

With accreditations, it is always important for the programme provider to be able to demonstrate that it has a verifiable quality assurance process, also for non-formal programmes and courses.

In practice, you also find separate examination bodies – a kind of joint venture between programmes. Grouping these under existing examination boards will go a long way towards quality assurance.

The current Institutional Quality Assurance Test (ITK) does not explicitly deal with quality assurance in non-formal education; it is therefore advisable to do so in ITK 3.0. This is, at the same time, a recommendation for NVAO in the development of a new version of the assessment framework.

Theme 2

Non-formal student

Unlike students following formal education, contract students and/or students following a flexible path are not automatically associated with a programme, a study year or even an institution. How do we monitor the quality of the study programme and the rights of the non-formal student?

CASE 8

Modules of academic quality for professionals following a programme

Student path: Modular learning

How do you set boundaries and limits?

A university offers an online, part-time Master's programme. Professionals in the relevant field wish to follow a number of subjects in this programme separately. The university would like to meet this learning need and offer certain combinations of subjects as modules for this target group. Further discussions with the professional field show that some of the learning objectives and content elements need to be slightly modified, as the learning needs of the professionals do not correspond exactly to those of the initial students. At the same time, there is a desire for academic credentials so that it can be clearly demonstrated that the modules offered are at the Master's level and that the learning goals have been assessed.

This case brings up two issues:

1. *Learning goals and learning outcomes.* Since the learning needs of professionals and initial students are not the same, the learning outcomes of courses not taken as part of a programme often need to be modified. The issue then is how to uphold the academic credentials.

2. *Separation of funding streams.* This is a challenge when providing education to students: transparency of funding streams is needed to avoid an uneven playing field with funded and non-funded institutions.

› Possible solution and guiding principles

As a programme provider, you have the discretion to change the offer for students. Differences in learning outcomes between course participants and initial students would be a reason for a critical review by the examination board should a course participant wish to become a student. This student would then have to go through the regular admission procedure of the programme. The examination board determines whether the student is admissible and if so, which exemptions apply. It is then up to the examination board to assess whether a course participant has achieved the same learning outcomes as a student following the same module within a programme.

CASE 9

The status of contract students within the institution

Student path: Modular learning

How do we arrange quality assurance for non-formal students?

EA contract student has a number of specific requests, including extra exam time and a laptop for an exam. The department providing the programme is of the opinion that the examination board is inadmissible to assess these requests, as the contract student is not a student as defined by the WHW. Moreover, this category of students is (permanently) unrepresented in participation bodies and/or in educational evaluations. The status of persons who take part digitally or follow other special forms of education is not laid down in the WHW. However, we expect flexibilisation to lead to an increase in these forms of enrolment. This raises a series of questions, such as: How are these 'students' represented in participation bodies and in the evaluation of education? What possibilities for appeal and objection do they have?

Are they entitled to facilities for exams and the like? Is it up to institutions themselves to pursue policies on this? Does the faculty board decide on this, or can it give a mandate to the examination board concerned? What about quality assurance for non-formal students? In short, and to put it somewhat more provocatively: do non-formal students have the same status as formal students?

› Possible solutions and guiding principles

Institutions currently have widely differing perceptions of what constitutes a course participant or contract student. The recommendation is to strive for equal treatment of course participants and formal students as much as possible, even if their enrolment and learning activities do not fall under the WHW. A student charter might be a step in the right direction. A good example of such a charter is that of the Hanzehogeschool⁵.

Why is equal treatment advisable? One significant reason is that students can also become regular students - as flexibilisation increases, we will increasingly see a switch from contract to formal higher education. If students want to enrol at an institution, it must of course be possible for an examination board to validate the results they have achieved.

What do quality experts say about this topic?

With this theme, it is best to reason from the professional's point of view, and not (too much) from the legal framework. The question is also how much you should want to embed in the WHW, and how much you (unintentionally) lay down. That may not even be desirable or necessary, especially since no broad discussion of this topic has yet taken place within OCW. This is expected to happen in the near future. Given the above, working with a student charter would be a good interim solution.

⁵ www.hanzepro.nl/media/kz4lphhb/cursistenstatuut-hanzehogeschool-groningen.pdf

Theme 3

Valuation after an individual programme

Can a student receive a full diploma after completion of an personalised programme of study followed at several programme providers or institutions? Where is the boundary?

CASE 10

ISAT Code, multiple final levels

Student paths: Off the beaten track, MyDiploma

What is and is not possible?

In case of reviews or accreditations, the ISAT code is invoked. There may be different variants under the ISAT code: full-time, part-time and dual. The curriculum design may differ per variant and target group precisely because, as a programme provider, you want to connect with the target group. To give an example, an institution provides the professional competences component. For formal full-time students without work experience, this component is completed at level 2. For part-time students with work experience, it is completed at level 3. The rationale is that they are already stepping in at a higher level. During a review, this is not approved on the grounds that the variants must test at the same final level. For the programme in question, this means that the level of part-time students cannot be matched in this case.

In this case, it is about the balance between formal quality requirements and customisation on the part of programme providers. How does external quality assurance look at this difference in final attainment levels between the full-time and part-time versions of the same ISAT code? What is and is not possible? And how can a programme connect sufficiently with different target groups?

> Possible solutions and guiding principles

A programme provider has a set of final qualifications. The recognition applies to the programme as a whole, so the final qualifications are the same for all variants. Irrespective of their origin and prior knowledge and experience, all students in all variants must meet the same requirements for professional competences, for example. The path to developing these skills may differ for each student (target group); however, the final level is fixed.

A student may always exceed the minimum required in terms of demonstration of competences. One way of rewarding quality or level is to award extra certificates. Diploma supplements may include additional credits. The added value can be recognised and added to the diploma supplement.

CASE 11

Limits to studying 'outside' the programme

Student paths: Off the beaten track, MyDiploma

How flexible is a diploma?

A university would like to know how a panel of experts would assess a diploma that consists of components a student has selected from a number of institutions. Is there a limit to the number of components from 'outside' the programme so that a diploma could still be obtained from Leiden/VU/InHolland, for example? To take an extreme case, could you obtain a Bachelor's degree by getting 20 ECTS from 9 different institutions? If it is in keeping with the OER in terms of content, level and coherence, if the panel believes that the OER has been correctly applied, and if the ITK panel is satisfied with the assurance, would it be acceptable in all cases? So, the real question here is: how flexible is a diploma?

› Possible solutions and guiding principles

The ultimate test is whether the examination board believes that the intended learning outcomes of a programme have been met. All educational units are described and recorded in the OER. The student must satisfy the requirements with regard to these units, but if they can present an alternative performance for one or more educational units accepted by the examination board (provided by any institution), this should not be a problem.

It is conceivable that the examination board insists the student complete the graduation phase at their own institution. This would seem a justifiable requirement in order to demonstrate a guarantee of graduation quality.

What do quality experts say about this topic?

In practice, there are limits to what a student can do 'outside' the programme. Accountability for performance outside the programme starts with the student - they will have to provide convincing evidence. Furthermore, demonstrable ownership by one programme provider, or institution, and the clear role of the examination board are critical in assessing the value of a diploma.

There are also questions about this topic in the European context, and we are looking into whether Microcredentials can provide an answer to these questions.

Many surveys on this subject are currently being conducted in Europe. The results of these surveys will be compiled in the near future so that we can benefit from them in the Netherlands.

Theme 4

General principles for accreditations

During accreditation procedures, the NVAO standards are assessed. How much room do these standards offer to programme providers and review panels when assessing flexible forms of education?

CASE 12

Flex-studies - what about the return?

Student paths: At your own pace, Off the beaten track, MyDiploma

How do you keep quality and quantity in balance?

Many institutions of higher education would like to see more study programmes participate in the flex-study pilot. As programmes become more flexible, the quantitative return becomes increasingly difficult to assess: 'flex students' have an impact on return and on funding. This can pose a challenge for institutional accreditations and accreditations of programmes, as the return on investment of the programmes (throughput and outflow) is also taken into account. Publicly-funded institutions have a great responsibility in this respect, as it concerns public money.

The key question here is: to what extent do panels take into account the effect that flex-study has on returns in institution and programme accreditation? What can programmes do to obtain a balanced assessment of quality, even if there are critical questions and remarks about the quantitative return?

› Possible solutions and guiding principles

According to the current NVAO assessment framework 2018, inclusion of return ratings is no longer a requirement. During an ITK, panels sometimes look at the efficiency figures published by the institution and can ask the programme departments what they are doing to limit student drop-out. As an institution, you have to provide a solid framework for this. It is important to explain how the return is achieved in order to give context to the figures when making assessments. This way the figures have meaning and it is easier to explain why they are, for example, lower than expected. In addition, student drop-out is less of a problem if it turns out that students are switching programmes or progressing to another programme.

CASE 13

Flexibilisation and review: competent panels and shared ownership.

Student paths: At your own pace, Modular learning, Buiten de gebaande paden, MyDiploma

What is the quality of the quality check?

The provider of a dual Bachelor's programme is taking part in the Learning Outcomes Experiment and has made a number of changes to increase flexibility in recent years. During the assessment of the programme as part of the Learning Outcomes Experiment in October 2018, the review panel proved insufficiently prepared for the changed requirements of the Protocol for Assessment of Existing Experiments in Learning Outcomes. During the review, panel members discussed internally how they should determine whether the programme was sufficiently flexible and what the requirements exactly were. As a result, the programme provider felt unable to respond adequately to the situation.

This case concerns competent panels (review committees) being able, in terms of composition and knowledge, to perform their task

adequately, especially in times of flexibilisation of programmes and courses. It is also about shared ownership – monitoring quality is the joint responsibility of the programme department and the external assessor. The crux of the question is how to jointly assure the ‘quality of the quality check’?

› Possible solution and guiding principles

It is essential that the panel is well trained in advance and is in agreement about the assessment criteria and how to interpret them. The extent to which a panel is able to look at processes and plans in a process-oriented way and not base their assessment so much on achieved results has an effect on the outcome of the programme assessment.

An important starting point is the educational concept for flexibilisation as proposed by the university of applied sciences/programme provider (to NVAO) at the outset. Accreditation panels check whether the educational concept has in fact been implemented in this way, with well-founded adjustments, after experiences gained. For panels, the question of whether the programme lives up to its promises is an important touchstone, and some of the key elements may or may not be present. But above all, it is the individual student who decides what kind of flexibilisation suits them after being properly informed by the institution/programme provider about all the flexibilisation options and what that entails. The outcome may be that the student opts for the programme curriculum, which would of course also be a valid choice. It is up to the programme provider to recommend the right panel, which should embark on the process well-prepared. The Evaluation Bureau or the independent secretary is responsible for ensuring a sound evaluation process.

The Bureau, secretary and panel members operate independently, of course, but as a programme provider you are the commissioning party, which means you also have a say in the preparation. The secretary has a crucial role in this process – from the preparation phase they are the key player, a coordinator whose task is to ensure that the lines of com-

munication run smoothly and that the discussion is kept on track. A good preparatory meeting by the Evaluation Bureau and/or the secretary is therefore essential. This is precisely why it is important to clarify in advance which steps the programme provider wishes to safeguard.

And finally, in terms of the composition of a panel, NVAO can provide guidance and direction. Training of secretaries and chairpersons (panel) by NVAO is a crucial aspect, together with thorough preparation.

CASE 14

Interim changes to a programme curriculum – should we go ahead with this or postpone it?

Studentroutes: At your own pace, Off the beaten track, MyDiploma

Should we fine-tune a running engine?

A Bachelor’s programme at a university of applied sciences in the Netherlands was accredited four years ago. Because of various developments in the field, the programme now has to be thoroughly revised. The committee responsible would like to take this up so that it is once again in line with current developments in the field. However, this will lead to such rigorous changes to the programme that they will have to justify two different programmes for the upcoming course accreditation. It was therefore decided to postpone the revision by two years so that it would coincide with the next accreditation cycle.

This case concerns the revision of a programme in the interim. This is necessary and desirable, as the interaction between developments in the professional field and what this means for a study programme is becoming more pronounced; a programme must continue to develop and adapt alongside these developments. How do you address continuous renewal while also continuing to satisfy applicable quality standards? How do you fine-tune a running engine?

› Possible solution and guiding principles

You can always change a programme, provided you retain the identity of the programme. In terms of quality this means that the programme number (ISAT code) must remain the same in the CROHO. In other words, all sorts of changes are possible, even between two accreditations, as long as the core content is guaranteed. If this is not the case, you should consider whether the programme should perhaps be registered as a new programme (including the macro-efficiency application and TNO). As a programme provider, you should therefore make a clear distinction between plans and 'work in progress' so that the review committee can also consider these matters from that perspective. It is also advisable to indicate on which points an assessment of the quality achieved is possible. This transparency helps the review committee to form a comprehensive picture of the programme in both the 'old' and the 'new' style.

Panels assessing the quality of a programme must be able to deal with such issues as changes in years 1 and 2 and the quality achieved and phasing out of years 3 and 4, for example. In practice, they often have to deal with situations where parts of the curriculum have already been renewed and others not yet, which means that some cohorts are still completing the old programme and other cohorts are following the new one. In such a situation, the panel's assessment is a mix of reviewing the quality of the plans and at the quality achieved. Of course, it is important that the final level of the students in years 3 and 4 can be accurately assessed.

So does this mean you can change the final attainment goals in the interim? The answer is yes, and it can be done every year, provided there is legitimacy for this from the academic and professional field. In addition, there is a domain-specific reference framework for joint programmes which you also have to be able to align with. Within that framework, final qualifications of similar programmes may differ; that is not an issue.

What do quality experts say about this topic?

Quality experts' most important considerations regarding this topic are already included in the possible solutions.

In the next chapter, we look to the future and describe which developments in the area of quality assurance can be expected in the near future, and how these may influence this and other themes.

Looking to the future: policy developments regarding flexibilisation and quality assurance

This second part of the publication takes you through the latest policy developments in the area of flexibilisation of higher education in relation to external quality assurance and legislation and regulations.

We begin the chapter with *capita selecta* in respect of flexibilisation from the Strategic Agenda for Higher Education and Research, which was published in December 2019⁶. Next, we outline the main contours of a first elaboration to facilitate the strategic ambition of making higher education more flexible. We do not claim to be exhaustive and are aware that this publication only reflects the current state of affairs. This outline of developments is mainly intended as a supplement to the compilation of cases from current practice. We want to illustrate that this topic is very much evolving and that in time there will be more leeway to meet the challenge of making education more flexible without compromising quality.

Strategic ambition to make higher education more flexible: Capita Selecta

The Strategic Agenda formulates the ideas of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) regarding flexibilisation. The following quotes from the text of Chapter 5 of the Strategic Agenda, 'Higher education that is flexible enough to respond to student needs', give a good idea of the direction in which our higher education should be moving.

- The four-year ambition is for more institutions to provide flexible education that responds rapidly and effectively to the demands of increasingly diverse students, including working adults. The number and proportion of working adults in higher education will have increased substantially by then. (...)
- The ambition is to ensure that public institutions also focus more and better on the education of working adults, thereby fulfilling their social role. (...)
- In addition to continuing education, upskilling is also important. Because graduates are expected to be able to manage their own professional development. Therefore, it is desirable to pay more attention to the student's management of and co-responsibility for designing their higher education programme. (...)
- Making study programmes more flexible involves the possibility of varying the form, time, pace and location, as well as the leeway students have to make their own choices. (...)
- In the short term, flexibilisation requires amendments to legislation and regulations, the aim being that the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW) should encourage and help institutions to organise their education flexibly and in a way that is tailored to the needs of the student. Of course, the quality and level of study programmes must be guaranteed. (...)
- The current policy trajectory on accreditation of institutions will, in the context of exploring the balance between quality assurance and experienced burdens, also look at whether adjustments must be made to the quality assurance system for more flexibility. This will include experiences with accreditation assessments of flexible programmes in the ongoing Learning Outcomes Experiment. It will also look at what lessons can be learned from the pilot projects for the accreditation of institutions. (...)
- OCW will make flexible participation (= enrolment per EC) in accredited programmes possible. For working adults, it is important to be able to adjust the programme to varying time demands in both work and private life. This means that it should be possible for the pace of study to be staggered, accelerated or

⁶ 'Sustainable for the Future' Strategic Agenda for Higher Education and Research (December 2019)

decelerated. Offering flexible, modular participation lowers the threshold and promotes accessibility. (...)

The above measures have an effect on matching education provision to the needs of working adults. It is equally important to pay attention to fostering the demand for lifelong development, as it should be an attractive proposition for adults to follow a course of study again. The Lifelong Development Programme aims at strengthening the learning culture and lowering barriers for the entire working population. An expenditure scheme, the so-called STAP budget (improving labour market position), is being developed in the framework of this action programme to replace tax deduction of training costs. It is intended to stimulate individual demand and participation.

Contours of implementing the strategic ambition to make higher education more flexible

To facilitate the strategic ambition of making higher education more flexible, various proposals, developments and concrete actions are already underway in the areas of legislation and regulations and external quality assurance. In this section, we give a brief description of developments that were mentioned in the previous section, with a reference to the original sources.

Development: possible changes in legislation and regulations

Within the framework of the flexibilisation pilots, OCW carried out an inventory to identify and remove obstacles from frameworks and legislation. Discussions on the subject of 'legal obstacles' are also taking place within the flexibilisation zone (see e.g. www.scienceguide.nl/2020/09/de-whw-eeen-analoge-wet-in-eeen-digitaal-tijdperk; in Dutch). In the coming years, adjustments to legislation and regulations will be pursued so that institutions are better able to design and offer their programmes in a flexible manner.

Development: Accreditation of institutions

In response to an exploratory survey carried out by OCW among the education umbrella organisations and student organisations, the Dutch Minister of Education, Culture and Science in 2019 sent a letter to the House of Representatives about the approach to experienced regulatory pressure for quality assurance in higher education and the importance of a culture of quality. At the time, the Minister announced to further consider, together with the educational field, the elaboration of an institutional assessment ('institutional accreditation'). By means of this institutional assessment, the government acknowledges that an educational institution may itself guarantee and improve the quality of its education, without the government having to assess this for each individual programme.

In a letter dated 11 February 2021, the outgoing Minister of Education wrote that there is broad support for a system change in quality assurance, with a switch to institutional accreditation as of 2024⁷. This means that institutions of higher education will be responsible for the quality assurance of their programmes. According to the Minister, the current quality assurance system is not responsive enough in the light of increasing flexibilisation of study programmes. "The current quality assurance system can accommodate many different types of education, but does not encourage the institution to develop forms of quality assurance suited to the diversity of education. Yet this is precisely what is required given the need to make higher education more flexible so as to take lifelong development a step further", writes Minister Van Engelshoven.

What this means specifically is that from 2024 onwards, only individual institutions will be assessed by NVAO. Programmes will no longer be assessed by NVAO. "In the new quality assurance system, all institutions offering accredited higher education are assessed by the NVAO once every six years for institutional accreditation", explains the Minister.

The periodic programme assessments based on independent and expert peer review will remain mandatory, but will be carried out under the full responsibility

⁷ www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2021/02/11/brief-aan-tk-inzake-instellingsaccreditatie

of the institutions themselves. However, this system change does not mean that programme accreditation will be a thing of the past after 2024. If institutions fail to achieve institutional accreditation, NVAO remains responsible for quality assurance at the programme level. In the event of a negative assessment on the test for institutional accreditation, either immediately or after it becomes apparent that shortcomings have not been remedied within two years, programme accreditation will continue to take place in the same way as it does under the current system.”⁸

The current quality assurance system can accommodate many different types of education, but does not encourage the institution to develop forms of quality assurance suited to the diversity of education. Yet this is precisely what is required given the need to make higher education more flexible so as to take lifelong development a step further. This is where the system of programme accreditation comes up against something we have known for a long time – that an academic university or university of applied sciences is more than the sum of its programmes. Institutions invest in more flexible education in the interest of students and employers in response to a changing labour market and societal developments within a global context. They also develop education in the form of modules, minors, programmes and other educational units that fall outside or in between formal programmes.

When the government makes pronouncements on the value of education in the interest of students, employers and society at large, its opinion should also extend to the quality assurance of other educational units. One example is microcredentials. Institutions cannot guarantee the quality of microcredentials in the same way as for entire programmes and must develop new ways of quality assurance for this. A system of institutional accreditation provides the best conditions for this and incentivises the institution to develop a quality assurance system that also ensures the quality of educational units other than the programme, in line with the diversity and flexibilisation of higher education.

⁸ By courtesy of ScienceGuide, Frans van Heest www.scienceguide.nl/2021/02/er-komt-een-eind-aan-opleidingsaccreditaties-door-de-nva0

When assessing the quality assurance system, the primary aim should be to ensure the quality of diploma-based education. However, at the institution’s suggestion, the scope of the assessment may be extended to include the assurance of components of study programmes, such as graduation profiles, learning paths, minors, modules and the issuing or validation of microcredentials. While this has no direct consequences for the funding or accreditation of such education, it does make it possible for institutions to collaborate, possibly in a national and European context, towards a system in which the quality and validation of smaller educational units is monitored and encouraged.

Developments regarding flexible participation in accredited programmes

In June 2020, the Parliamentary motion for flex-study was submitted, in which the Parliament requests the government to enshrine the pilot project Flex-study⁹ in law as soon as possible, so that by 1 September 2023 at the latest, payment per study credit will be structurally possible at all institutions and for all study programmes.

Developments in incentive schemes for lifelong development

The STAP budget, in which employed and non-employed people receive a personal development budget of up to €1,000 per year, will be introduced on 1 January 2022. The scheme has been developed in outline and the final scheme is expected in the course of 2021. You can find all the latest information about the STAP budget at www.stap-budget.nl.

⁹ www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/plenaire_verslagen/detail/ebc41acc-f92a-4402-8b1c-dfbf-c5e2273c#id753fc791

Final word

*What can we learn from this compilation of case studies?
And what are the prospects for the future?*

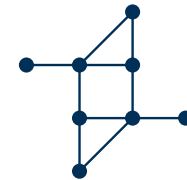
We see that higher education in the Netherlands – and all related aspects in terms of legislation and regulations – is undergoing considerable changes and is moving towards more flexible education that meets student's needs. This is aimed at meeting the needs of young adult students, a target group that is becoming increasingly diverse and therefore has different needs, as well as those of working adults who are looking for a suitable educational path within the framework of lifelong development.

We see that within current legislation and regulations, it is already possible to provide flexible education that meets the quality standards of higher education. We also see that there is still plenty of work to be done at the level of institutions, where all kinds of practical matters have to be arranged so as to give shape to flexible education and the associated quality assurance. Examples are the way examination boards organise themselves, how the internal quality assurance system focuses on educational offerings that are not directly related to a programme, how administrative processes are set up and how responsibilities are arranged with regard to educational units... to name but a few of the many challenges. There are also challenges outside the institution: how can we influence legislative and regulatory changes? How can we contribute or cooperate in realising the ambitions of the Strategic Agenda?

One thing we can be sure of is that we cannot do this alone! More flexible higher education requires us to look beyond borders, to join forces and to forge ahead together. In that sense we will, as Flexibilisation of Education Zone and, more specifically, as Working Group on Quality Issues, assiduously continue the work we have started and with SURF's Acceleration Plan.

On behalf of the Working Group on Quality Issues,

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Credits

Impact of flexible student paths on quality assurance

Acceleration Plan for Educational Innovation with IT - Zone Flexibilisation



Acceleration plan Educational innovation with ICT

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