



Follow-up report ENQA review

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Content

Follow-up report ENQA review	4
Introduction.....	4
Follow-up recommendations	6
ESG 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance	6
ESG 3.3. Independence.....	7
ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis	7
ESG 3.5 Resource.....	8
ESG 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct	9
ESG 2.1 Considerations for internal quality assurance	9
ESG 2.4 Peer-review experts	10
ESG 2.5 Criteria for outcomes	11
ESG 2.6 Reporting.....	11
ESG 2.7 Complaints and appeals	11
Final remarks	12

Follow-up report ENQA review

On 21 June 2018, NQA received the “ENQA Agency Review of the Netherlands Quality Agency (NQA)”. This report was the basis for the ENQA Board’s decision to grant NQA ‘ENQA Membership’ on 12 July 2018. The newly acquired membership obligated NQA to draft a follow-up ENQA Review within two years. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, NQA consulted with Mr. Goran Dakovic and was granted a deferral till September 2020.

Introduction

The last two years have been very successful for NQA, not only due to the high standard of quality it has achieved but also commercially and financially. The coming years promise to be just as successful.

This success however, also has a downside. This is mainly due to work pressure. Study programmes undergo an audit every six years according to an audit visit schedule determined by the NVAO. Regrettably these audit visits are not evenly divided over the course of the six years as has also been commented on in our self-evaluation. As a consequence, NQA must deal with an excessive number of assessments during a three-year period. This is followed by three years of relative calm with less than half of the audits that were processed during the busy phase. The NVAO has acknowledged this imbalance in the meantime. The busiest years were from 2017 to 2019. During this time NQA devoted all its attention to the primary process of assessment. The large number of audit visits scheduled by the audit visit schedule coincided with a stricter interim evaluation of the study programmes taking part in the ‘experiment flexible learning outcomes’. Many of these study programmes had chosen NQA to conduct their interim evaluation. Moreover, NQA had succeeded in attracting more clients in 2018 and 2019 who asked it to carry out ‘research evaluations at Universities of Applied Sciences’. It is a challenge for NQA to remain financially fit during the unbalanced workload in the period of 6-year, while at the same time retaining expertise, senior staff and directing them effectively to ensure assessments were carried out competently. NQA has succeeded; customer satisfaction during 2018 and 2019 scored 7,6 against our own standard of 7. Considering the many complicating factors, maintaining such a high standard of quality exceeds expectations.

We expect the extremely high work pressure, described above, to continue until mid- 2021. Normally work strain would decrease by mid-2020. However, due to COVID-19 and everything that NQA has done in consultation with stakeholders and clients to make online audit visits possible while retaining the requisite quality of assessment, will probably cause work pressure to continue. In the past two years NQA has therefore devoted much time to recruiting new staff who meet the demands of seniority as formulated by NQA, to accommodate the expected departure of several senior staff members. Staff turnover has also caused the transfer of assessment projects by the old to the new secretary, resulting in



lengthier coordination with the client than usual. There was concern that this would affect the average client appreciation score but, as previously mentioned, this has remained the same.

The volume of assessments has had an impact on planning and implementation of the 'recommendations' included in the panel's report and specified in the letter in which the ENQA Board confirms NQA's membership. Important improvements were planned for the first half of 2020 but due to Covid-19, several of these have been postponed until the second half of 2020 and the first half of 2021.

In the following paragraphs NQA indicates per recommendation what action it has taken or still plans to take. If NQA sees no opportunity to act (within the possibilities afforded by the Dutch accreditation system or does not endorse the added value of a recommendation, it will give further clarification).



Follow-up recommendations

ESG 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance

NQA is recommended to set up an advisory committee with representatives of different relevant stakeholders.

NQA is recommended to formalise its strategic plan to reflect on its objectives

Follow-up NQA:

- As indicated during the site-visit, NQA sees insufficient added value in a formal advisory committee, taking into consideration the procedures and the intensive contacts NQA maintains with all stakeholders. An advisory committee has been set up in the past. However, it was dissolved on advice of the committee itself on the basis of insufficient added value. This does not refute the importance of feedback given by stakeholders and the willingness to act adequately on their suggestions. In 2019 and 2020, NQA consulted intensively with student unions in the Netherlands (see ESG 3.4) to boost student involvement. The results were subsequently discussed with a large delegation of committed quality assurance staff members from education institutes. In 2019 and 2020, NQA also had in-depth discussions with the Ministry of Education and Sciences about further development of the Dutch accreditation system. Moreover, in 2019, all NQA secretaries spent a whole day visiting two major education institutes to learn from their experiences and exchange know-how. All these activities were discussed during team meetings and insofar they were applicable, have had an impact on policy and/or procedures. This more thematic interaction with stakeholders is pursued next to regular intensive contacts with stakeholders of which a description is included in the Quality Management Document.
- The management review (provided as additional information with the title 'NQA Directors Assessment 2019') is a formal, substantiated document. NQA annually outlines its goals/objectives in a formal director's assessment, in keeping with its mission and vision specified in the Quality Management Document which also incorporates its long-term objectives. In NQA's opinion, such long-term document doesn't suit the dynamics and developments of the environment in which it operates. Over the years, the organisation's flexibility has resulted in several experiments which gave NQA the edge over its competitors. Experiments with cluster visitations in the period 2012-2015, including thematic analyses, are proven examples of the advantage of flexibility. More recently, in 2019, the 'agendized audit' was introduced which caters to clients who want a better regulation of the accreditation process and also a stronger focus on development rather than assessment during the site visit.



ESG 3.3. Independence

NQA is advised to establish stricter internal procedures in order to better organise consulting and assessment.

It is recommended that NQA stresses the importance of including a number of international experts in audit panels assigned to review institutions.

Follow-up NQA:

- The procedures NQA employs to separate its evaluating and advisory activities have been described as adequate in the “ENQA Agency Review Netherlands Quality Agency (NQA)”. No deficiencies have been identified regarding this aspect. The recommendation for improvement does not mean other or stricter procedures should be implemented but rather consistent monitoring of existing procedures. The recommendation therefore urges us to stay alert. For example: prior to a particular advice process, it led us to ask the NVAO if, in their opinion, the project would compromise our impartiality. This was not the case. See also ESG 3.4.
- In the Netherlands, the education institute in question determines the composition of the audit panel, not NQA. The NVAO must approve how these panels are compiled. Panels are not required to include a foreign expert among their members. Sometimes, taking into account the specific situation of the study programme, the inclusion of a foreign expert on the panel is desirable, but sometimes it's unnecessary. NQA does advise education institutes about compiling a competent panel. If panel nominees are lacking in international expertise, NQA will point this out to the institute. If it is desirable to include an international panel member, given the profile of the study programme, NQA will advise this. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, NQA is considering the increased use of online means to facilitate the participation of international panel members, so they can take part in virtual assessments without traveling and costs.

ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis

NQA is recommended to include thematic analysis in its planning as a regular activity.

NQA is recommended to use a part of the budget and the experience and knowledge of internal and external secretaries gained from various assessment procedures in order to conduct those thematic analyses.

Follow-up NQA:

- NQA organized workshops in 2019 and 2020 with student unions in the Netherlands together with QANU. The results of these workshops were published in the ‘HO magazine’ in 2019 and 2020 and also on the websites of the NQA and the student



unions. To prepare for the workshops, NQA secretaries teamed up with external secretaries to share and communicate their experience of student involvement. In addition to publications, the meetings resulted in a list of 'do's and don'ts' for student panel members and students interviewed by the audit panel during the site visit. NQA will publish the do's and don'ts on its website in September 2020. The results will also be included in the 2021 panel guide book.

- One of the secretaries made an inventory of provisions regarding the legal retention period for documents in response to the many questions posed by clients. Secretaries can help clients when ambiguities arise concerning this topic. Publication of this inventory on the NQA website is pending.
- Together with other agencies, NQA has drawn up a memorandum for the Ministry of Education about the quality of the accreditation system and its continued development. NQA initiated the first draft of this writing.
- NQA has made available to the NVAO, two legally substantiated memorandums, partly based on ESG directives. The first concerns measures implemented by the NVAO with regard to 'privacy laws' and the impact on transparency of the assessment process. The second focuses on the stricter requirements for impartiality of panel members and whether the NVAO provides sufficient safe guards to ensure this. Although both documents are internal reports exchanged by NQA and NVAO, they nonetheless show NQA's intensive commitment to the quality assurance of the accreditation system.
- NQA has formulated the goal of holding a thematic analysis once every two years and furnishing the necessary means to make this possible.

ESG 3.5 Resource

NQA is recommended to look at measures to keep valuable staff members engaged in the organisation during the periods of low workload.

Follow-up NQA:

As mentioned in the introduction, NQA recruited new staff in 2018 and 2019. This was done partly to replace staff members who the directorate knew were leaving after a prolonged tenure to pursue new challenges elsewhere. And also to expand existing staff to cope with the increasing number of assignments. Recruitment of new employees was based on a broader profile so that staff can be deployed in a wider capacity in 'periods of low workload'. With this new team of staff a brainstorm was organized during 2019-2020 to develop new products for meagre years. These are currently being elaborated on during the Covid-19 period.



ESG 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

NQA is recommended to reflect on ways to intensify the communication with the authorities and other relevant stakeholders in order to gather greater feedback about procedures and their effectiveness and relevance.

Follow-up NQA:

- See also ESG 3.1 and 3.4, which make clear that relations with students and education institutes have been further intensified.
- The relation with the Dutch authorities has become more remote due to a legislative amendment in 2018, especially as a result of the NVAO's interpretation thereof. The legislative amendment means that the individual secretary now functions as contact person for the NVAO and no longer the 'Agencies'. This approach by the NVAO is regrettable because the Agencies are responsible for carrying out more than 95% of the assessments. At an operational level the relation between staff of the NVAO and NQA remains good despite the fact that Agencies no longer count as discussion partners on policy matters.
- For the first time, a dialogue has been initiated with the Ministry of Education with regard to further development of the accreditation system (see ESG 3.4) which NQA is keen to pursue.
- The relation with the Education Inspectorate remains good and was further strengthened in 2019 as a result of an invitation by the inspectorate to participate in its annual education congress. Agencies are not normally invited. Regrettably this was not possible due to Covid-19 restrictions.
- As a reaction to 'suggestions for further improvement', NQA has formulated the ambition to intensify its relations with panel members. However, this aspect has as yet not been further developed owing to the persistent work load and the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition to regular evaluations by and with panel members, NQA aims to organize a review day for panel members in 2021 to be repeated once every two years.

ESG 2.1 Considerations for internal quality assurance

It is recommended that NQA could demonstrate in its procedures and guidelines more the ties between the standards of Part 1 of the ESG and the standards in the programme assessment framework, in order to strengthen the awareness of panels and institutions

NQA is recommended to evaluate in how far the ESG standard 2.1 is effectively addressed during the programme assessments and communicate its findings to the relevant stakeholders

Follow-up NQA:

- The NVAO assesses 'Part 1 of the ESG' as made clear in the document 'ENQA Agency Review Netherlands Quality Agency (NQA)'. Audit panels and NQA are expressly requested to avoid an overlap of assessments between the 'institutional audit' carried



out by the NVAO and the 'limited programme audit' executed by NQA. This was also emphasized in the introduction of NVAO's new 'assessment framework 2018'. 'Limited programme audits' implemented by the NQA are not expected to address 'Part 1 of the ESG'. Due to national legislation NQA can therefore not follow through on these recommendations.

- What NQA does do in situations when shortcomings are found during a limited framework audit caused by deficiencies arising from Part 1 of the ESG, is to annotate them as points for improvement in its report. The reports in which shortcomings refer back to 'Part 1 of the ESG', have all been included in the formal decision taken by the NVAO. At the same time, none of the reports have been revised by the NVAO to include recommendations for improvement that refer back to 'Part 1 of the ESG'.
- NQA can make improvements to its guidelines and procedures by including a chart that correlates ESG Part 1 and the 'standards of the limited framework'. NQA will only include this in its 2021 guidelines because the 2018 assessment framework was implemented in 2019 and extensively elaborated on.

ESG 2.4 Peer-review experts

NQA is recommended to strengthen the training of panel members in different ways, such as training sessions for new members and update sessions for experienced members.

Follow-up NQA:

- The performance as well as feedback of panel members is important. That's why NQA conducted in the second half of 2018 a formal internal audit within the framework of ISO-2015. Four results came out of this internal audit:
 - o Writing a guideline for chair panel members how to give the final feedback and preliminary results at the end of the site visit (result: realized and communicated to panel members)
 - o Work-out the instruction for new (chair)panel members (result: realised, see below)
 - o Explore the possibility of a buddy-system for chairs (result: not realized because of workload)
 - o Explore a regular meeting with panel members to learn and further improve (result: realised for studentmembers (see ESG 3.4; Not realizes for peer panel members because of workload, see below)
- The preparation/training of panel members has been improved. Chair persons and panel members who have not yet participated in an assessment will be briefed individually by the secretary. Extra time has been reserved during preparatory discussions to accommodate this.
- The audit panel guide book 2019 and 2020 starts with the most important changes with regard to the previous 'assessment frameworks' from 2016 and 2018. It is very important that panel members are aware of this. For that reason preparatory meetings will begin with a summing up of the most important changes by the secretary.
- The introduction of the 'agendized audit' also helps panel members to acquaint themselves with the 'assessment framework' and the related calibration. Because



preparatory meetings are held on location several weeks before the site visit along with an initial introductory talk with the management of the study programme, there is more time for panel members to adjust to the context of the study programme in the build-up to the actual site visit. Right then there is still sufficient opportunity for additional instruction if the secretary notices that a panel member lacks insight.

ESG 2.5 Criteria for outcomes

NQA is recommended to strengthen the training of panel members about the application of the criteria and using that expertise to build a more robust view about them and further improve consistency.

Follow-up NQA:

With the introduction of the 'assessment framework 2018', 'the grading system' of the standards was changed from a four-point scale: 'excellent-good-satisfactory-unsatisfactory' to a three-point scale: 'sufficient - partly sufficient -insufficient'. Both the Agencies and the NVAO are extremely pleased with this change because it promotes consistency to a high degree and eliminates the window-dressing caused by 'good-excellent'. For that reason this recommendation is no longer topical because the discussion about whether a study programme is up to standard or not and if there are noteworthy deficiencies, was adequately implemented in the assessment frameworks of 2011, 2014 and 2016. It now serves as the primary basis for assessments in the 2018 assessment framework.

ESG 2.6 Reporting

NQA is recommended to publish the report on its own website or to include the link (to the NVAO database) as NQA already enunciates in its SAR

Follow-up NQA:

NQA has included a link to the NVAO database on its own website.

ESG 2.7 Complaints and appeals

NQA is recommended to develop a complaints procedure and communicate it to the institutions. That should include the establishment of an independent and competent commission that may handle any relevant issues.

Follow-up NQA:

- This procedure still needs to be implemented. NQA agrees with the recommendation but as explained in the introduction, has not had time to further elaborate its initial plan. NQA will strive to implement a procedure in line with the procedures of the NVAO and QANU.



It expects to have developed a fitting procedure by the end of 2020 and be able to implement it at the beginning of 2021.

- This procedure will be included in the 2021 guidebook for study programmes.
- The proposed complaints procedure cannot be totally open, taking into account the division of authority in the Netherlands between the NVAO, the audit panel and the Agency when it concerns content-related objections to the assessment. The complaints procedure can only be open to objections lodged against assessment procedures followed by the NQA and/or the panel including the adequate exercising of the hearing both sides consultation. The judgement of the audit panel is not open to discussion unless procedural mistakes have led to an incorrect or incomplete assessment. In that case, part of the assessment or the whole assessment will be conducted again by the panel or in exceptional circumstances, by a completely new panel.

Final remarks

NQA hopes that this follow-up report offers sufficient insight in the steps NQA has taken and means to take in the future. NQA hoped to have advanced further regarding certain aspects, for instance more intensive contact with panel members (despite praise from panel members during the ENQA site visit) and setting up a complaint's procedure, but work pressure, staff turnover and the resultant focus on primary processes has led to the prioritizing of achievable goals. In this light NQA is proud it has been able to implement ESG 3.4 and sustain a high customer satisfaction score.