

**QUALITY ASSESSMENT AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY
AT THE UNIVERSITEIT VAN AMSTERDAM
THE NETHERLANDS**

Rob de Klerk, Klaas Visser and Liesbeth van Welie

1. INTRODUCTION

Like in most other countries after World War II, in the Netherlands the traditional system of educational quality control came to a definite end. This system was characterised by small numbers of students and intensive personal contact between the university professor and his (or in exceptional cases: her graduates). This enabled the individual professor's status as a scholar to be taken as evident guarantee, not only for the quality of the curriculum and the educational system as a whole, but also for the quality of individual graduates. Scholarship and the education of new scholars were primarily an internal university responsibility.

Post-war trends entailed a progressive erosion of the authority of universities in their own domain. Particularly, the explosive increase in the number of students, along with the concurrent spiralling costs of higher education (plus the growing awareness of the social impact of science) necessitated the design of objective measurements of educational quality. The first factor (student numbers) linked the process of change to the relationship between staff and students: structural rules replaced personal contact, and large classes the individual relationship between master and pupil. The second factor led to a growing awareness of the economic aspect of education as a scarce commodity and the demand for societal control of the system that consumed an increasing share of the government budget. Objective means for assessing and comparing the quality of education was seen as the key to a modern system. Designing such a system required choosing between various solutions for key elements of the system:

- Which instruments are applied for identifying educational quality?
- Which institution is responsible for judging the quality of programmes and institutions? (More specifically: what role does the national government play in the assessment system?)
- Should the results of assessments be released to the public?
- In what way can be guaranteed that assessments initiate change and improvement?

Differences between the systems chosen by various countries reflect differences in objectives, in structure and development of higher education and in general political developments in individual countries.

This paper analyses the Dutch system of quality assessment based on the experiences at the *Universiteit van Amsterdam*. The following description and analysis of three different elements serve to enable comparisons between the functioning of various national systems:

1. the factors that explain the specific system chosen in the Netherlands for systematic assessment of the quality of Higher Education;
2. the structure and operation of the system and the roles played by the various groups and institutions in higher education (students and staff, management of programmes and departments, central administrations at universities, national government);
3. the influence of the outcomes of assessments on and the management and policies of change with respect to programmes of departments on the one hand and the impact on the central administration of universities on the other hand.

The third item - do assessments work? - Is the hardest to deal with in an unambiguous way. External assessment is only one the factors influencing the institutional development. Many other factors can impede the negative outcomes of assessment to be put high on the agenda, the specific policies of improvement to be developed, or the policies pursued to achieve the required results.

An analysis of these factors appears in paragraphs IV, V and VI. Paragraph II describes the developments within Higher Education and the government policies with respect to educational institutions in recent decades. This background explains the development of the Dutch system of Quality Assessment. In Paragraph III, we introduce the *Universiteit van Amsterdam* the characteristics of its quality management. Paragraphs 4 and 5 analyse recent assessments and follow-up for the Faculty of Psychology and the Faculty of Economics.¹ Paragraph VI examines changes in decision-making and policies as a result of assessments at the central level of the University. Paragraph VII contains a summary and conclusions.

2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DUTCH SYSTEM FOR QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Understanding the Dutch system of Quality Assessment requires a description of the developments within Higher Education and within government educational policies in the Netherlands from the late 1970s onward. During this period, the foundations were laid for the new philosophy on Higher Education.

2.1 The new philosophy

In the Netherlands, the foundations of a controlled educational system as an alternative to the traditional one were laid only in the 1980s with the construction of a legal framework for a modern system of higher education. In the previous decade, a systematic expression of the new objective

¹ Three relevant layers exist within the organisation of Dutch Universities: the central level of the University, the Faculties, and the Departments. Faculties are rather autonomous entities that manage curricula and research in a certain academic field (Economics, Medicine, Psychology, Law, etc.). The faculties comprise departments responsible for education and research in the respective subdisciplines.

underlying the system of higher education appeared in the government document “*Higher education for many*” (*Hoger onderwijs voor velen*)². Higher education was to become accessible for everyone with the required level of secondary education. This new philosophy, which reflected the more general social ideology of equal opportunity, was manifested through major changes in important aspects of the system of Higher Education:

- enforcement of the **external democracy** of higher education: the increase of students from the middle and working classes eroded the exclusive character of university education;
- Encouragement of **internal democracy**: throughout the Western World, the 1960s and 1970s were characterised by broad social emancipation and innovation within the confines of Higher Education. In 1970, the demands of revolting students for the replacement of the authoritarian rules at universities by a modern representative democracy acquired a legal framework through a new regulation regarding the administrative structure of universities in 1970;
- **Course structure**: the “*Two phases in higher education act*” (Wet Twee-fasenstructuur) of 1978 distinguished between the initial stage of higher education (concluded with a doctorandus degree)³ and a subsequent stage leading to a doctorate, or offering a postdoctoral vocational training. Very few second-phase courses (for researchers and teachers and for a few professionals such as medicine and psychology) were acknowledged as purely scientific. Most such post-degree programmes were classified as professional training that required private funding. The act was among the government’s instruments intended to keep higher education for the masses within reasonable budget constraints; content and length of curricula in higher education: reducing the length of programmes to four-year courses through this act has played a major role in the institutions’ quest for quality in education thus far.

Finally, the increasing interdependence between society and university has instigated debate on the quality of higher education and possible methods for measuring such quality. This discussion, which more or less duplicated a public debate in the 1980s, was characterised by a dominant role for social rather than internal academic criteria.

² Ministry of Education, The Hague 1978

³ There are specific legal rights connected to the *doctoraal* degree, which have both academic and professional value. Graduates of the *doctoraal* examination may use the title *doctorandus*, which is abbreviated as *drs* in front of the name. The corresponding titles in engineering and law are *ingenieur (ir)* and *meester (mr)*, respectively. Since the introduction of the University Education Act of 1986, it has been possible for *doctoraal* graduates to use internationally more familiar title of “Master”, abbreviated as an “M” after the name. This possibility has also been included in the Higher Education and Research Act (*WHW*). The *doctoraal diploma* is a prerequisite for admission to post-*doctoraal* training programs and the *promotie*.

2.2 The development of a professional quality assessment system⁴

The introduction of the Dutch quality assessment system for higher education reflects more general social developments that changed the institutional role of higher education:

- a growing awareness of the social impact of science and the concomitant wish for societal control over academe and the education of new researchers and teachers;
- the explosive rise in both the number of students and the accompanying growing complexity of education;
- the increasing financial burden imposed by the educational sector.

All these developments reinforced the demand for more public control over education: the educational sector should account publicly for the results achieved. In evaluating these results through a quality assessment system, social criteria should at least be added to internal standards of scholarship.

Quality assessment of education is as old as education itself. The informal discussions after class between professors and students, however, are far from a systematic instrument for uniform measurement of the quality of all aspects of the educational process: curriculum content, curriculum structure, didactic quality, etc. Moreover, quality assessment had always been an internal university affair. The most systematic account of objective methods of quality assessment in Higher Education in the Netherlands appears in the government 1985 report *'Higher education: Autonomy and Quality' (Hoger Onderwijs: Autonomie en kwaliteit [HOAK]5)*. This report highlighted the assessment system that was to be introduced.

Prior to this report, the discussion had mainly concentrated on the instruments used to evaluate and improve educational quality. The first government proposals for the implementation of quality assessments date back to the proposed *"Act on University Education"* (*Wet op het Wetenschappelijk onderwijs*) of 1981 that identified two kinds of quality assessment:

- **Internal quality assessment** was seen as the autonomous responsibility of universities and faculties. The procedures for assessment were to be developed by the Academic Council (**Academische Raad**), which has different sections for the different academic disciplines. These sections were responsible for co-ordinating quality assessment for their respective disciplines;
- **External quality assessment** required the establishment of a body that operated independently from the universities. In the original plans, this Inspectorate of Higher Education was to carry out the government's constitutional duty of verifying education. The department was intended to supplement the internal assessments by regulating examinations of educational adequacy. It was responsible for gathering information and

⁴ This paragraph is partly based on: Peter J.M. Weusthof, *De externe kwaliteitszorg in het wetenschappelijk onderwijs* (External quality management in scholarly education), Lemma 1994.

⁵ Ministry of Education, The Hague 1985

advising the minister of education on this subject. In this form, the structure of assessment has never functioned in reality.

The following reactions to the proposals from the universities hardly consider the proposed system. Dominant subjects in the position taken by universities include the lack of consistency in educational policy within faculties with respect to maintaining a continuous process of quality control⁶ and the nature of suitable instruments for assessing quality.⁷

The *HOAK report* mentioned above introduces a new point of view emphasising control from a distance as the government's guiding role in education. The government hoped that enlarging the responsibilities for university institutions would stimulate systematic pursuit of qualitative improvement. Anticipatory (input-) regulations for the structure of courses and educational programmes⁸ were to make way for posterior (output-) quality control instruments, while the promotion of a market-oriented approach among universities was intended to further educational quality and efficiency as competitive instruments. The *HOAK report* contains two proposals for quality assessment:

- Universities must introduce systematic evaluations of education at departmental, faculty and university-wide levels. Statistical performance indicators must improve the reliability of evaluations, and employers of university alumni should play a role in evaluating educational quality.
- The HOAK report proposes that evaluations by the institutions are to be supplemented by an independent assessment on the part of the Inspectorate. This Inspectorate was to form Assessment Committees that periodically evaluate educational quality. The members of such committees must be eminent professionals with a thorough knowledge of the field. The Inspectorate is responsible for designing the methodology, targets, preparation, and assessment support, for supervising the assessment protocol, and for issuing a report to the minister of education. Sanctions for negative assessment results are also required.

Two reactions from universities dominate the discussions about the *HOAK report*. The criticism focuses on two items in the proposal: the use of statistical performance indicators and the government control exercised through the institution of the Inspectorate.

The primary objection to the performance indicators concerned their nature. They supposedly enabled objective qualification of certain educational characteristics (predominantly output characteristics) that might serve as a standard of quality. Intended to provide a uniform frame of reference for all different programmes, they offered the possibility of a nation-wide ranking system. Opponents, however, noted that the instrument had serious shortcomings. At the same time both qualitative aspects of education were assessed as well as characteristics of the structure and the educational process. At best, performance indicators provided an incomplete representation of

⁶ Such control should result in part from the distance between decision makers at the various university levels and the autonomy of the department within faculties.

⁷ In various institutions, instruments were developed for assessing educational quality both in the instruction and in the overall curriculum quality.

⁸ Some examples appear in the *Academisch Statuut* (Academic Constitution).

quality, was the idea. Another reason for criticism was the government's use of indicators: statistic indicators seemed perfect for controlling the educational sector and conflicted with the philosophy of relative autonomy for the institutions. This criticism from the institutions convinced the minister that the use of statistic data was not in itself a guarantee for quality improvement, and they disappeared from the government agenda for educational policy within a few years.

The universities also thought that this dominant role for the inspectorate in the original plans interfered with the intended autonomy for the institutions.

The government defended the Inspectorate's importance by claiming political accountability for education. From this point of view, universities claimed that self-evaluation by institutions should be the cornerstone of any system of quality maintenance. They stated that government judgements rendered in such a system risked being completely arbitrary and they did not expect such government interference to improve educational quality. Universities achieved their goal: the system introduced in the late 1980s excluded the Inspectorate from a central role and self-evaluation was the heart of the Quality Assessment programmes.

2.3 The present system of quality assessment and quality maintenance

In 1986, the institutions for higher education and the government reached agreement on the quality assessment system. As in the previous proposal, the system combined internal quality management with external quality assessment. The newly established Inspectorate of Higher Education had a complementary and meta-evaluative role. The meta-evaluative aspect would focus on the assessment procedures - specifically with regard to method and content - and on sending reports to the minister of education. Overall however, the system might be considered the internal business of the universities.

Internal quality assessment is the task of the individual faculties. Their educational responsibility must be based on a systematic evaluation of all aspects. Within the national system of quality assessment, they are responsible for issuing self-evaluation reports every five years.⁹ These reports link internal and external quality assessment.

External quality assessment is executed by Visiting Committees of independent experts every five years. The educational programme and not the institution, is the main subject of inquiry. The system as a whole is organised and co-ordinated by the Association of Co-operating Universities in the Netherlands (*Vereniging van Samenwerkende Nederlandse Universiteiten* [VSNU]). In addition to a check-list of necessary data prepared by the VSNU, study guides and strategic plans of institutions, such self-evaluations are the main source for preparing the external quality assessment procedure that also involves a site-visit to the institution. The findings and conclusions of the assessment are published in the form of a final report.¹⁰ The first quality assessments took place between 1987 and

⁹ The applied checklist for self-evaluation consists of eleven items: student recruitment, staff development, curriculum, extra-curricular educational activities, didactic design of education, study load, internal quality management structure, educational support, counselling for study habits, study progress, and licentiates.

¹⁰ In an earlier round of discussions on a national quality assessment system the public nature of the conclusions had been a source of debate. It was argued that the threat of publication would encourage window dressing among institutions. The present system guarantees a thorough investigation. The extensive

1993.11 The evaluation of this first cycle has led to minor modifications in the procedures. The second cycle, which started in 1995, is still in progress.

2.4 Differences between the first and second cycle of educational assessments

The peer-reviews generally proceed as follows:

Each course reviewed assessed once every five years according to a schedule. The people involved in the programme write an evaluation addressing all educational aspects (curricular profile, examination, proceedings and success rates, relation to the job market, organisation, involvement of staff and students, etc.). This evaluation is completed six months before the assessment committee's visit and forms the basic documentation provided to the committee along with the study guide.

During the preparatory stage, the review committee requests additional information (e.g. a set of graduation projects, exams, reports by departmental committees, policy documents, etc.). During the visit, which lasts about three days, the assessment committee interviews as many of those involved as possible (students, teachers, committees, and boards), identifies problems, and above all investigates whether the participants all subscribe to the components of the evaluation. After assessing all comparable programmes at different universities, the committee generally issues a report containing conclusions and recommendations for each course, as well as a report for the whole programme with recommended future changes for the programme concerned.

The underlying principles of the assessments are to stimulate critical self-analysis (by writing the evaluation) and to enable the committee to judge whether this analysis contains adequate criticism and covers a broad scope, and above all the organisation's proven ability to resolve the problems identified.

Several significant changes have taken place between the first and the second cycle. A special checklist and standard format for the self-studies enable comparisons and ensure coverage of all aspects of educational quality. Writing an evaluation should not be an isolated project. Rather, broad collaboration is essential. People from abroad (mainly Belgians) now participate in several assessments. The second round focuses far more on content. The committees are responsible for verifying the curriculum content chosen according to general curricular profiles. The assessment committee's evaluation also carefully considers the standards achieved through the curriculum by evaluating a set of graduation projects. Last but not least, the reports are no longer confidential but are to be released to the public. This decision has elicited heated debate - it might lead to window-dressing by the different curricula, was the assumption- while the entire process should be open, including issues concerning a programme's shortcomings.

discussions of the results of assessments in the national newspapers ensure that institutions take quality management seriously.

¹¹ In 1987 experimental assessments were conducted in the faculties of Psychology, Natural Science, Machine Building, and History and resulted in a few minor modifications. The VSNU book of data proved of little use and was discontinued. To keep the flow of information to the committee manageable, the written documents were restricted to self-evaluation, the study guide, and the most recent report on education by the institution. Students were assigned a more prominent role in the assessment process.

3. QUALITY ASSESSMENT AND QUALITY MANAGEMENT

Since 1632, when the scholars Barlaeus and Vossius established the *Athenaeum Illustre* (the Illustrious School), the Universiteit van Amsterdam has evolved into an institution that accommodates 26 000 students and 6 000 staff members in fourteen faculties offering about a hundred different degrees and countless research projects. The university operates with an annual budget of approximately \$435 million. About 3 400 doctorandus degrees and 325 doctorate degrees are awarded annually. The *Universiteit van Amsterdam* is a large, classical university in a long tradition. A strong presence in a comprehensive range of academic disciplines facilitates interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary scholarship with an explicit orientation toward current societal and cultural issues.

The university's prime objective is high quality education for its heterogeneous population of full-time and part-time degree students, foreign students, young researchers, and all others studying at the Universiteit van Amsterdam (UvA). Notwithstanding its well-established international outlook (both European and world-wide), the UvA sees the city and community of Amsterdam as its home ground in more than a geographical sense. The university feels as its responsibility to serve the city as a centre of knowledge, learning, and culture in its own multicultural setting.

3.1 Research assessment

This paper deals with quality assessment of teaching. For several years now the Netherlands have a system of research assessment, apart from the system of education assessment.

Faculties supply a self-evaluation for the research assessment just as they do for teaching assessment. In this self-evaluation the different research-programs are explained and the scientific output for each research-program of the last five years is recorded (publications, promotions, effort of personnel in relation with the amount of publications, the contract research and applied research). Furthermore these core publications have to be delivered for each research-program.

An international assessment committee has a meeting with the program-leaders, judges the quality of the research output (amongst others by using citation index numbers) and gives an account in which the research programmes are judged on five criteria: quality, productivity, relevance, viability and management.

The qualification for each criterion is given on a five-point scale, and also a qualitative explanation is added. (N.B. The procedure described here can change for each judgement; each assessment committee has a certain liberty in the way of judging).

3.2 The impact of quality assessment on the university administration

Over the years, the reports by the assessment committees on quality management at the university level have had an obvious impact. The Executive Board meets officially with the review committee and is invited for the briefing at the end of each site-visit, where the committee gives its first impressions. The follow-ups of the reports figure on the agenda of the Board's annual evaluative meeting with the dean and the representatives of each faculty.

Apart from the measures taken on the level of faculties, on the level of the university board some developments were set in motion meant to improve the general infrastructure of quality management and educational policy-making. In 1991, a quality manager was appointed to support faculty members in all kind of projects aimed at improving teaching quality. Demonstrating a strict causal relationship between these projects and the outcomes of the assessments in the first cycle of peer visits is rather complicated. Most of all the reports by the visiting committees enriched discussion among faculty members on quality improvement and their role in these changes. The Department of Medicine was among the first to develop a procedure for responding to the advice of external peers. An overview was made of all critical remarks and suggestions by the committee. A staff of faculty member was responsible for implementing the necessary changes for each item on this list. The dean and faculty board evaluated the results. All other departments have followed this procedure. The central administration has also drafted an overview of all conclusions of the assessments, as well as the planned follow-up. With regard to this follow-up, the Executive Board evaluates the quality of government, management, and administration for each faculty on an annual basis. Quality management of teaching and research are among the many issues in this evaluation. Negotiations based on these data result in a covenant between faculty and board that replaces direct uniform allocation of financial resources with standard agreements granting the faculty more autonomy.

3.3 General outcomes of the reports by the assessment committees

As mentioned previously, the discussion about the outcomes of the assessments initiated many projects at departmental and university levels. The items in the final report of the visiting committees appear in quality programmes at the University. Some examples for each item appear below:

1. Comments concerning curriculum content:
 - consistent and horizontal curricular programming as opposed to longitudinal programming by each separate division;
 - reinforcement of the relationship between research and teaching;
 - explicit goals for each course;
 - didactic diversity;
 - instructional innovation in response to the rapid increase in the number of students.

2. Skills to support learning rather than merely teaching as a central concept:
 - debating and writing skills;
 - enrichment of individual study habits among students, planning;
 - cultivation of general academic discipline.

3. Management of teaching:
 - reduction of the rates of attrition and prolonged study;
 - design of a consistent system for quality management;
 - enhancement of the follow-up of teaching evaluations by students;
 - greater efficiency in data collection and corresponding changes and improvements;
 - improvements in leadership;
 - development of HRM management for faculty members;
 - improved access from secondary education.

4. Teachers:

- instruction of first-year students by internationally renowned professors;
- student guidance and counselling by faculty members;
- didactic training;
- more frequent use of research results in teaching undergraduate students;
- career-planning opportunities in teaching as well as in research.

All over the university, these recommendations in the assessment reports contributed to the discussion on the necessity of quality-improvement for individual faculty members or faculty-wide teams initiated projects. As several faculties worked on the same issues, the university quality manager brought these groups together and designed specific training and support for people involved in comparable programmes.

3.4 Institutional quality improvement programmes

Sections 4 and 5 describe the follow-up to the faculty assessments for the departments of Psychology and Economics. In this paragraph we present several institutional projects. Section 6 deals with a new teaching organisation as the combined result of all these separate programmes and projects.

3.4.1. *Improved access*

Both because university professors have not been involved in final exams in secondary education in the past twenty years, and because almost no secondary school teachers work on a thesis at the university nowadays, the lack of communication between secondary and university education has become a problem. Students also complained about the discontinuity in teaching practices and expected skills when entering the university.

A successful programme to enhance co-operation among teachers at both educational levels started in 1993. Some thirty schools work with all faculties of the Universiteit van Amsterdam. About two hundred and fifty teachers are involved in a programme offered to students in their last two years of secondary education and their first year at the university. Secondary school students visit the university, and university professors teach classes in schools. The programme provides students with a greater understanding of the responsibilities associated with choosing to continue their studies study at a university. They try to determine whether they have made the right choice before they enter the university and assemble a portfolio to document this process. This co-operation offers many opportunities for research about student findings and expectations.

3.4.2 *Didactic training*

Faculty members have helped design a course for beginning university teachers. This course consists of theoretical training, practical skills, and teaching strategies. Each trainee is coached by a senior faculty member. On request, tailor-made training sessions are available for divisions or teams of teachers (e.g. for teachers of first-year students). Individual requests for coaching or training can also be met. A centre for didactic training in higher education at the Universiteit van Amsterdam coordinates these programmes and initiates and designs new courses.

3.4.3. *Interdisciplinary courses*

Students in the Dutch university system choose their area of specialisation before they start their courses at the university. Before the duration of their studies was limited to four years, students had the option of taking courses and obtaining degrees in other disciplines as well. In intellectual and academic respects, however, demand for interdisciplinary teaching is increasing, as many complex societal and research questions require a multidisciplinary approach.

As of 1995, the Faculty of Natural Science began to offer first-year students access to all fields of natural science. In September 1996 a new first-year programme will comprise studies in social and natural sciences and offers a multidisciplinary approach in themes, such as entropy and evolution. A combined course of studies in social sciences has been elaborated as well.

Soon, the Universiteit van Amsterdam will offer interested undergraduate and graduate students the opportunity to pursue major and minor combinations. The university expects to meet student needs by offering these combined programmes without losing any study time.

4. QUALITY ASSESSMENT AND FOLLOW-UP IN THE FACULTY OF PSYCHOLOGY

The Faculty of Psychology comprises about 2 000 students and 60 staff members, including 12 full-time professorships. The Faculty's annual budget equals approximately 10 million dollars. Apart from the Psychology programme, the course in Computer Science for the Social Sciences has about 10 graduates a year. About 180 students complete the Psychology programme annually with an average incoming enrolment of 320 students. The Faculty offers courses in all important areas of specialisation. Clinical Psychology and Industrial and Organisational Psychology are the most popular. The Faculty of Psychology is the only one of its kind in the Netherlands. Elsewhere, courses in psychology are part of the Faculty of Social Sciences. The established research tradition at the Faculty of Psychology sets standards for the quality of the study-programmes. The curriculum spans 4 years, starting with a first-year programme and a basic doctorandus course that form the undergraduate programme and continuing with specialisation that leads to an MA (graduate level).

4.1 The first assessment

In the late 1980s, the Faculty participated in a try-out of an educational assessment procedure. This assessment was confidential. The Faculty regarded it as a bureaucratic operation that required co-operation. It was much in the interest of the VNSU to improve commitment for its system of peer review. The friendly and favourable (and above all confidential) report contained few points of criticism and focused on several more organisational and procedural matters. In effect, the assessment and its findings were of little importance to the Faculty. While the Faculty followed a few content-related recommendations, it soon faced other problems, partly as a result of marked growth in incoming enrolments without any commensurate increase in teaching staff.

In the early 1990s, the Faculty of Psychology had many educational problems, including a tremendous increase in student enrolment that climaxed with 750 first-year students in 1992, a major decline in study results, severe student dissatisfaction with the programme's anonymous nature and the aloofness among the staff, complaints about the level of many examinations, poor curricular content, unsatisfactory course capacity, a far from flawless student administration, badly co-ordinated information for prospective students, mediocre information services for enrolled students, little

systematic educational evaluation and no follow-up, and so on. Students felt unwanted and deplored the qualitative deficiencies (if only the instructors were better, if only they received better guidance, etc.), while instructors attributed all problems both to an excessively large student body and to the lack of motivation (there are too many students, their standards are too low, they are lazy, etc.).

4.2 Steering committee for educational improvement

With regard to both the educational assessment in 1994 and the tremendous concern for the general quality of education, the Faculty of Psychology formed a steering committee for educational improvement in 1992. People believed that the strong emphasis on research and publications had compromised concern for education. Investigations were rapidly being assigned to prestigious research schools, while education was becoming an increasingly fragmented area of responsibility and seemed less important. The small steering committee operated independently from all existing groups (educational committee, departments, Faculty Council, etc.) and was not obligated to account for its actions. The committee received the following assignment:

- ensuring greater commitment for education and its results throughout the faculty;
- examining the curriculum in depth through an individual evaluation of teachers (an analysis of strengths and weaknesses), partly referring to the educational assessment of 1994;
- designing the investigation of the course as extensively as possible and suggesting improvements; an approach should be developed that created a favourable educational environment, not restricting the project to a few staff members, but allowing universal participation and using all knowledge, insight, and experience available among people with the closest possible involvement in education (bottom-up instead of top-down);
- turning educational quality control into a permanent fixture within the faculty culture.

The steering committee received a budget meant for financial incentives and granted the steering committee members (3 instructors, a student, and a newly appointed head of education) partial exemption from other tasks to do this work.

4.3 The Steering Committee's strategy

The steering committee conducted an inventory of all educational problems (a strength/weakness analysis). The members interviewed all professors and many of the other university teachers concerned, as well as a large group of students, student counsellors and co-ordinators. The steering committee submitted a list of possible themes for discussion and invited the participants to add any subject concerning education within the Faculty of Psychology.

All interviewees were happy to share their opinions about education and offered several ideas for improvement. They also proved fairly unanimous (including the students) in their belief that the study objectives emphasise high quality, cohesion between research and education, and the imposition of unambiguous, objective demands on the students.

The report summarised the interviews and listed all subjects requiring solutions and plans in the near future. This report was discussed by democratically elected bodies and resulted in general approval. In addition, the original suspicion toward the steering committee that operated independently of the official council disappeared once people realised that the steering committee considered all opinions seriously, hoped to tackle problems that many considered insoluble.

4.4 Problems and solutions

The following list describes the measures proposed by the steering committee that were accepted. All recommendations resulted from the aforementioned analysis of strengths and weaknesses that divided planning in 4 categories.

1. *Programme and didactics.* Clearly formulated educational objectives, more varied working methods; didactic training for instructors; a new programme for the basic curriculum that highlights content and research, clearly structured courses of study in which students work in teams.
2. *Testing.* Appointment of a test co-ordinator to control the quality of all examination material in advance; more diversified testing methods; different examination regulations to eliminate guessing on multiple choice exams among students; more rigid guidelines.
3. *Support and evaluation.* Adoption of a uniform evaluation system, including follow-up by panel discussions in which students and instructors review the instruction; data collection about the educational goals pursued by students; improvement of the student administration; inventories of dropouts and a problem-analysis; more consultation between teachers.
4. *Information, guidance and study behaviour.* Generation of regular feedback for students through study advice; establishment of mentor systems and courses teaching study skills; improved information about the programme, collaboration with regional schools, extra information days, training for advisors, etc.; more academic counselling through regular information in a newsletter, more individual counselling and more counselling about optional paths; measures to prevent delay, such as the implementation of partial examinations to be taken during the courses.

Departments, departmental committees, staff meetings, and students discussed and implemented all measures in widespread agreement.

4.5 Educational assessment

The external assessment took place in the midst of the internal quality improvement effort. The committee concluded that the programme's academic standards were very high, that the students' ultimate level of education varied from good to excellent, and that the curriculum design was clear and unambiguous. The peers considered the educational quality, the teaching methods, and the instructors as good, as well as the student counselling and information services.

The committee also concluded that the staff and students generally agreed on the course objectives and were very committed to education.

The visiting committee praised the steering committee for implementing educational improvements for many initiatives and recommended the prolongation of its work.

In addition to minor issues, such as the testing system (which the steering committee tackled immediately), the major point of criticism concerned persistent inadequate student progression especially during the freshmen year. The committee blamed this problem primarily on the massive nature of the first-year curriculum and recommended increasing efforts to integrate knowledge and insights.

4.6 Measures to improve progression and yield rates

In response to quality assessment, it was felt that the implementation of many educational improvements demanded an integral approach to study delay. Such measures were necessary mainly because of budget cuts by the government, resulting amongst other things in 4 year instead of 5 year courses. Students had far fewer possibilities from switching from one programme to another, since they would then exceed the 4 year programmes. Profound investigation of the problem with delayed study programmes has indicated that while the course is certainly demanding, it is far from excessive (the assessment committee shares this opinion), that experiments with small groups of students receiving additional instruction show that they perform significantly better, and that teaching should focus increasingly on learning among students through educational stimuli.

The problem of study delay is attributed mainly to instruction in large classes (non-compulsory lectures, self-study, and extensive testing). Students receive little incentive to study, as much depends on their dedication. Accordingly, they tend to afford many other aspects of their lives priority over their education. The recommendations include supplementing the large first-year lecture classes with assignment-based laboratories in which small groups of students meet twice a week to work out their course material under an instructor's supervision. Students receive weekly assignments about the material currently on the syllabus and are expected to write papers. Integrating and processing the material are the main areas of emphasis, as is preparing for the tests and applying everything learned. Students should also receive feedback about their progress twice a week and have access to individual coaching in studying the material. In addition, curtailing the number of tests is intended both to force students to study at the time a particular section of a course is offered (reduce the tendency toward prolongation) and to prevent resists from impeding enrolment in new courses.

In 1995/1996, a try-out was conducted with a select group of first-year students, and in 1996/1997 the system will be implemented with funds for improving programme practicability, as described elsewhere in this article.

The faculty strongly approved of the plan, which is remarkable because the 1992 round of talks indicated that nobody wanted another costly educational scheme for the first-year programme. The instructors primarily attributed delay in study proceedings to a lack of motivation among students. This turnaround results largely from the realisation among the instructors that higher success rates are financially important and require measures against too long study programmes. Moreover, much closer interaction with students has considerably increased insight into the causes of academic procrastination and has revealed that a system characterised by massive and direct instruction, a lot of individual study, and many non-compulsory elements does not stimulate time-effective study behaviour.

4.7 Quality assessment in the Faculty of Psychology: an overview

The preceding paragraphs have conveyed means for designing and achieving a process for quality improvement. Educational assessment has played a major role here. Launching an educational assessment that focuses more than its predecessor on contents of programmes and a public (instead of a confidential) report that receives extensive press coverage has drawn widespread support for all plans for qualitative educational improvement.

The strategy's highlights are summarised below.

- The entire faculty has participated extensively in all initiatives. All improvements are based on a cross section of opinions and views among teachers and students.
- The steering committee has addressed all problems identified and has tried to present or elicit solutions, thus showing all those concerned that identifying problems is worthwhile.
- Facilitating initiatives is essential: all improvements that required money were funded by financial means available to the steering committee for improvement.
- The steering committee took communication with colleagues very seriously and issued continual reports concerning its activities, including a newsletter.
- The Faculty Board that installed the steering committee consistently supported the plans.
- The steering committee always consulted the parties concerned as part of the planning process. It benefited from the ideas of staff and students alike while co-ordinating and adapting the approach of problems.
- Strategic data-collecting about the relationship between incoming enrolment, progression, and graduation and the faculty's financial situation has proved crucial.

The preceding paragraphs have supplied a blueprint for an ideal assessment and follow-up. In some respects, the process of qualitative educational improvement described for the Faculty of Psychology fits this image. The Faculty management placed education high on the administrative agenda and installed a steering committee. Next, this steering committee generated a self-assessment listing all problems and placing education and educational quality at the top of the agenda. It conceived a strategy for resolving problems and continually investigated the effectiveness of the solutions chosen. The external visiting committee praised the instruction at the Faculty of Psychology. One might even say that the educational assessment led to a constant process of internal quality control.

5. QUALITY ASSESSMENT AND FOLLOW-UP IN THE FACULTY OF ECONOMIC SCIENCES AND ECONOMETRICS

The Faculty of Economic Sciences and Econometrics (FEE), which was founded in 1921, hosts of about 3 300 students and 150 staff-members, including 25 full professorships. Its annual budget exceeds \$20 million. The faculty offers five curricula:

Economics, subdivided into three major fields of specialisation (Business Economics, General Economics, and International Financial Economics). Annually, some 300 students graduate from this department. About 85% have specialised in the following areas of Business Economics:

Fiscal Economics, a curriculum offered in co-operation with the Faculty of Law (about 20 graduates annually);

Econometrics (about 20 graduates annually);

Actuarial Science (about 10 graduates annually);

Operations Research and Management (about 10 graduates annually).

Students take the same first-year curriculum (known as the propedeuse) for Economics and Fiscal Economics. The same applies for students of Econometrics, Actuarial Science, and Operations Research and Management.

5.1 A short recent history

In the early 1990s, the FEE was in a difficult situation. The peer review carried out in 1990 had yielded extremely negative findings.¹² The curriculum, the educational support, the programme's didactic quality, and the development of faculty-wide educational policy were considered below average. Publication of the assessment's outcome did not, however, initiate the pursuit of improvements in the faculty's general functioning. A crisis within the faculty administration caused the negative educational assessment to fade into the background. The Faculty Council joined forces with the University Board in forming a committee to investigate the crisis and to formulate proposals for improvements. The investigation's results were even more negative than the educational assessment¹³: the research quality was found to vary between average and below average, and the educational structure and process were considered unsatisfactory. Above all, the faculty administration was criticised. The lack of collegial cohesion within the faculty was identified as a major determinant of the crisis situation: "the organisation does not operate as a community in terms of a group of people linked by a common mission statement and a common culture." Internally, the faculty is found to be strictly divided along the lines of the various departments. Externally, the faculty was characterised by a very hostile attitude toward the university's central administration for its perceived financial discrimination against the faculty. In one way or another, the obviously untenable situation, as characterised in the report, set in motion a slow but steady process of improvement. A period of interim faculty management restored sound managerial relationships. Remarkably, the policies pursued initially emphasised research (which was the strongest component of the activities in relative terms). Several appointments of eminent scientists were intended to improve research and at the same time restore the organisation's momentum and external goodwill toward the institution. Somewhat later, strategic educational policy-making and has been institutionalised in the institution's development thus far.

¹² VSNU, *Visitatie Economie (Economics Assessment)*, Utrecht, February 1991.

¹³ Commissie van Drie, *Rapport betreffende een crisis, diagnose en mogelijke therapie (Committee of Three, Report on a crisis, diagnosis, and possible therapy)*, April 1991.

5.2 A checklist of flaws

Adding up the points of criticism in the preceding assessments shows a rather discouraging checklist of flaws in educational structure, content, and support. The institution's operations were found to suffer from:

- An inadequate decision-making process with regard to qualitative educational improvement. The Faculty Board failed to assume responsibility and took decisions concerning education on an ad hoc basis. The official committees for education, known as Curriculum committees (Onderwijscommissies), did not function satisfactorily and lacked the necessary good will because hardly any of the full-time professors participated in them;
- inadequate adaptation of the organisation to the substantial increase in student enrolment;
- Insufficient didactic diversity in the courses. Large classes were the most common teaching format;
- a lack of cohesion within programmes;
- very low percentages of students completing first-year and doctorandus exams;
- Inadequate institutional research. The evaluation of education, the student administration system, study support and student counselling were found to be underdeveloped. The faculty bureau, which was responsible for these activities, was labelled as non-professional.

As noted above, direct and systematic measures against all these inadequacies lagged somewhat behind the institution's research policy. Apart from minor problems that might be tackled directly, the change in direction began with the formation of committees to investigate possibilities for major educational improvements.

5.3 A period of structural improvement: the organisation of education

In 1991 the Faculty Board instated a small working group "to investigate the various methods applied in the teaching of economics by examining the literature and visiting other institutions." Its findings¹⁴ produced a clear view of various options available to the faculty for improving the teaching quality. Again, this report did not bring about immediate and concrete changes. It did, however, arouse a general awareness of the importance of a framework for systematic and continuing concern for policies directed at improving educational quality. Thus, the project was transformed into a structural steering committee for educational innovation.

After assessing the possibilities for innovation at the faculty level the committee felt the need to consult the staff members in the various departments. Meetings were arranged with representatives

¹⁴ Rapport Werkgroep Onderwijsvormen (Report from the working committee on educational methods), February 1992.

from each of the eleven departments (and with two groups of students). The outcome clearly indicated general dissatisfaction with the existing barriers between departments and the decision-making process within the faculty, as well as the lack of co-ordination with respect to education. The steering committee concluded that a new organisational model with greater co-ordinating ability was necessary. A special project group spent a year designing such a model.¹⁵ The outlines of the new model conformed to the "school" concept propagated at the university level as indicated in an earlier paragraph.¹⁶ The committee's design was approved by the Faculty Board and the Faculty Council and was implemented by appointing a manager for the new School in early 1996.

5.4 A period of structural improvement: curriculum development

The Faculty Board's policy document (*Beleidsplan*) published in June 1994 redefined and systematised many procedures within the faculty during the early 1990s. It also emphasised the need to complete the professional bureau of education called for intensified development of commercial forms of education intended to attract new types of students to compensate for the looming budget cuts due to a structural decline in student enrolment.

The essence of the policy plan, however, consisted of a curricular blueprint. The gloomy financial prospects led to the announcement of a reorganisation of the educational system that would limit the faculty's scope to the core subjects and eliminate subjects at the margin of economics and interdisciplinary subjects. On this basis and within the boundaries for the educational structure defined in the Policy Plan¹⁷, committees (comprising mainly full-time professors) for each of the curricula offered started to reorganise the programme in 1995. The results of these efforts were too late to be introduced in the 1996/1997 academic year. As urged by the school's director, a minor reorganisation in the undergraduate programme was approved for the 1996/1997 academic year.

An overview of the various reports on the curricular reorganisation shows that two elements are paramount in the discussion on the curriculum within the faculty:

- The link between the number of staff in the programme and the applied model of financial distribution sometimes precludes restricting the discussions to content, as the

¹⁵ During this period, the faculty's organisation was improved by measures enhancing its co-ordinating power. By this point, the Faculty Board had already advanced from a reluctant body that played only a marginal role in drafting policies concerning the institution's core activities to one that shouldered responsibility for the institution's core activities to one that shouldered responsibility for the institution's systematic development. In educational organisation, the Committee for the co-ordination of educational policy (Commissie Coördinatie Onderwijsbeleid) was introduced to co-ordinate the various curricula and the respective departments, the Faculty Board, the Faculty Council, and the Faculty Bureau. This committee was disbanded after the appointment of the School Manager.

¹⁶ Report: "Naar kwaliteitsverbetering in het gemeenschappelijke programma" (Towards quality improvement in the undergraduate programme), July 1995. Co-ordination was especially difficult in the undergraduate programme, for which all departments were jointly responsible. The various graduate programmes are managed mainly within different departments. Initially, therefore, only undergraduate education pertained to the school's area of responsibility.

¹⁷ Elaborated in the report "Naar kwaliteitsverbetering in het doctoraal programma" (Towards quality improvement in the graduate programme), August 1995.

reorganisation model may jeopardise the departments' finances and staffing and thus elicit defensive attitudes toward change;

- Combining Business Economics and General Economics in a common programme has caused increasing difficulties. Various curricular reorganisations have therefore progressively reduced the share of general courses within joint programmes. They spanned one and a half year before 1992, one and a third after 1992, and have been curtailed to the first-year programme in the present proposals.

5.5 Quality assessment in the Faculty of Economic Sciences and Economics: an overview

In 1996, the second cycle of assessments of economic science is taking place (including site visits in June). The circumstances of the FEE have changed dramatically since the first assessment. In the current self-assessment cycle, the faculty has noted with satisfaction that most of the major shortcomings detected in the previous round have been eliminated¹⁸. The faculty is now under firm administration and has a professional bureau with sophisticated procedures and totally redesigned curricula to be introduced in the next academic year¹⁹. Only the success rates for first-year exams remain a source of concern for the faculty.

Do assessments work? The introduction to this paper raised this question and presented an ideal model of assessment as a frame of reference. The course of events within the FEE conforms to this ideal. No immediate and systematic response was organised following the negative assessment of 1991. Only in 1995, in preparing for the next assessment, a systematic account was drafted of the response to the former assessment²⁰. As we noted above, however, the first assessment initiated successful results.

An ideal assessment and response are attainable only in a friction-less world where external assessment is the only relevant factor. In reality, however, external assessment is but one of several factors influencing institutional development. Many other factors can impede negative outcomes of important assessments, specific policies to be drafted, or the practices intended to produce the required results. In the case of the FEE, all these factors affected the circumstances after the first assessment. A period of crisis restricted the agenda to the restoration of sound managerial relationships.

Subsequently, research policy was chosen as the lever for gaining impetus and retaining goodwill among outside forces. Only after equilibrium had been restored within the organisation did the centre of gravity shift toward education. The agenda for educational improvement resulted from the internal recovery and was not dictated by the results of the external assessment. The inclusion of the negative

¹⁸ "Onderwijsvisiatiatie" 1996 (Educational Assessment), November 1995.

¹⁹ In 1995, the Universiteit van Amsterdam conducted an internal assessment of the faculty administration. The report (Universiteit van Amsterdam, Faculteit der Economische Wetenschappen en Econometrie. Verslag van de Commissies Systematische Beoordeling van Bestuur en Beheer [Faculty of Economic Sciences and Econometrics. A systematic assessment by the administration], June 1995) praises the faculty's new system of management.

²⁰ FEE, Rapport Voorbereiding Onderwijsvisiatiatie (Report on the preparation of instructional quality assessment), July 1994.

outcomes of the assessment in the policies drafted for the institution's overall recovery was in essence coincidental. The FEE example has led to a few very preliminary conclusions about the system of quality assessment:

1. If an institution in crisis, suffering from weak management, and when a lack of social cohesion within the organisation inhibit realising the ideal process of assessment as outlined above, a general situation of equilibrium of an institution, strong departmental management and involvement with the institution as a whole probably stimulate such assessment:
2. Some kind of leverage is necessary to initiate such a process. In the FEE, the crisis provided a general impulse for change. This factor may be present in trends within higher education in this situation (and for all institutions). In contrast to the situation at the beginning of the decade (characterised by the massive increase in student enrolment), universities and faculties now face a serious decline in the number of students. Combined with the public accessibility of assessment reports, this situation leads to worry about the faculty's external (i.e. market) image and thus concern for the outcome of the assessments.

5.6 Common characteristics of UvA assessments:

The picture emerging from the case studies for psychology and economics presented above, demonstrates many points of divergence between the two. Evidently, the specific problems and methods of teaching in a certain discipline, the history of and common culture within a faculty, the number of students and staff, and specific institutional arrangements influence (together with the mere contingent features) education and thus the characteristics that are bound to be highlighted in assessments.

On the other hand there are common characteristics and problems, and a review of assessments for the other UvA programmes suggests that this is not coincidental for the programmes dealt with above. Some causes for points of convergence are easily established: all academic disciplines share the general model of organisation as laid down by law and must find ways to deal with the same (budgetary, educational and organisational) measures by the government. An analysis of assessments leads to the conclusions that at least two (interrelated) problems can be identified as common for (almost) all curricula:

- problems with integrating the separate elements of the curriculum into a coherent and consistent programme;
- problems with establishing an efficient and transparent organisation of education.

The former problem is at least partly the result of the latter and can be explained in terms of the legal arrangements for the organisational structure of universities.

6. THE DESIGN OF A NEW INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE

The ambitious programmes for quality improvement of teaching highlighted the limitations for profound changes within the given organisational context of a classical university. Several assessments also emphasised the need for stronger educational leadership.

Accountability for the quality of teaching in the Dutch university system is a highly complex matter. The Faculty Board shares responsibility with the Faculty Council. A joint commission of teachers and students have an advisory role, and divisions bear collective responsibility within their discipline. Individual faculty members enjoy academic autonomy in their work.

This situation has caused two main problems. In the first place, improvement projects require co-ordination and management to maintain coherence between all these initiatives. Of course, every project should culminate in structural, lasting improvements. A supportive organisational concept should provide the framework for these improvements. In the second place, the fragmented organisational structure and accountability results in processes of educational management and change where nobody wants to be- or can be held personally accountable for projects. Thus, for real progress in the field of quality management and educational policy on the Faculty level an organisational change to overcome these two problems, seemed to be a prerequisite.

6.1 The process

In 1993, the departments of Science and Economics simultaneously initiated a process for designing a new instructional organisation. The top-down planning led formulated goals to concrete plans for improvements in teaching, student counselling, human resource management, evaluation, and follow-up of evaluations. These data served as the basis for designing an efficient organisation comprising faculty members and staff. Institutionally, a working group was instated. Chaired by the Rector Magnificus, this group supported and evaluated these developments. The group drafted a checklist of criteria for each new School (as these institutions were called). A fund was raised for the formation of the Schools. The list of criteria comprises the following items.

1. The school is **responsible** for the content, design and co-ordination of teaching. Accordingly, the school functions in relation to the Faculty Council, the Faculty Board, the faculty director, and the departments.
2. The school is responsible for **managing** its primary terms of reference. To this end, a director is entrusted with the execution of duties arising from the Faculty Board's areas of competence with respect to the school.
3. The school gives a stimulating context for a policy intended to achieve **educational innovation**.
4. The school is a functional collaborative effort between teachers, students and **educational support** staff guaranteeing everybody's participation in opinion- and decision-making with respect to the educational process in general and the role of evaluations in adjusting this process in particular. For students, this guarantee includes their representation on the school board.

5. In performing its duties, the school maintains regular contact with the **departmental committee** and pursues a policy that considers the recommendations of the departmental committee, which forms the nucleus of **quality control**. The relationship between the school and the departmental committee has been explicitly established.
6. The school covers a restricted area of education within which it offers one or more clearly structured **curricula** or common segments.
7. The school provides satisfactory descriptions of the curricula, which are established in the **instruction and examination regulations** set by the Faculty Council.
8. In consultation with the departments, the school recommends annually to the Faculty Board (with regard for the appointment decision) specific teachers for certain duties for the institute's educational programme at certain periods.
9. The school ensures that the programmes and their constituent parts implement the explicit **final terms**.
10. The school maintains **structural contacts** with secondary schools, professional associations, university associations, research schools, and relevant sectors of the labour market. These liaisons may result in various curricular profiles.
11. The school ensures that programmes are based on **shared principles** regarding didactics, operating methods, and testing procedures.
12. The school formulates **attributes expected** from the professors and encourages further didactic training.
13. The school safeguards academic cohesion between **education and research**, expressed in part through the directions from professors, most of whom combine teaching and research at the school.
14. Teaching pertaining to the sphere of the school's activities shall be divided evenly among professors, senior university lecturers, and lecturers.

6.2 New leadership

The most important change in the academic culture is the appointment of a director for each school who is responsible for quality management. They have the difficult task of redesigning the administration of academic personnel and creating and protecting a congenial academic culture while simultaneously holding individual members accountable for instructional quality.

New trends are already discernible in these schools: increased emphasis on self-assessment, new initiatives for cross-institutional feedback within the university and among universities, and a more self-confident and authoritative approach towards the visiting committees.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper we analysed the development of the Dutch system of quality assessment in higher education and its application to programmes within the Universiteit van Amsterdam. We described this development as instrumental in the wider policy of realising a professional and controllable system of higher education. The outcome of a struggle in the eighties over the ultimate responsibility for the assessment of educational quality between central government on the one and Universities on the other hand, is a system in which quality assessment and the concomitant policy of quality improvement is principally an internal University affair.

In our analysis of the execution of the assessment system we focused on the assessment process, and not on the outcomes of assessment shortcomings. One of the factors impeding an immediate response to an assessment is the presence within faculties of an autonomous process of improving educational quality that may have been started from a quite different interpretation of the bottle-necks of the programme than expressed by the assessment committee. The commitment to this process may obstruct the incorporation of assessment results in the short run. This may work out successfully, however, in the long run as was demonstrated in the case study for economics. An ideal assessment process also implies a fruitful co-operation between the faculty level and the central level of the University. In paragraph III we presented some examples of specific policies that were born out of the interchange of ideas and needs on both levels that took place as a reaction to common outcomes of quality assessment for various curricula and in paragraph VI we explained that the priority in the educational policy of the Universiteit van Amsterdam for establishing schools for programmes can be interpreted as a means for developing an institutional and organisational framework that is more adequately adapted to combat general problems in education as became visible in assessments. The present organisational structure has proven to be too fragmented to guarantee a systematic execution of educational policy.

Some more general conclusions may be drawn from our reproduction of the development and applications of the Dutch system of quality assessment. For a complete success of the whole assessment procedure, institutions must enter it with an open mind and be ready and able to give it a follow up in developing and executing policies to combat the revealed shortcomings.

With respect to the first point there is always the danger of the bureaucratisation of the system when maintained over a large stretch of time: faculties may become inclined to approach the external assessment as an annoying disturbance of the own development. This threat may be intensified if there is a switch in focus of the assessment as was the case if we compare the first cycle of assessment with the second one. The readiness to take the external assessment serious may also be hampered if the external committee maintains a strong specific view on the subject of assessment that is not shared by the institutions itself. Generally, institutions have approached the assessment with an open mind. In spite of the public character of the assessment reports (which was at first believed to foster window-dressing) institutions have taken the external assessment as an opportunity instead of as a threat. This can be read from the self-assessment reports that openly discussed fundamental problems as experienced by the institutions itself. The self-assessment is a crucial part of the assessment procedure. In many cases the preparations of the self-assessment itself set in motion developments within the institutions that led to educational innovations even before the next external assessment had taken place. There are, however, strict boundary conditions for the situation in which faculties find themselves for such a development to take place. The most important one is the commitment of faculty members with the assessment itself and with the need and possibilities for educational policies at large. Within institutions the preparation of the assessment is left to the faculty bureau. For an institution that takes educational policy-making seriously, however, the role of the bureau must be a facilitating one. Only if the commitment of the scientific staff translates itself into leadership in the process of educational innovation, can the striving for better and better education really become institutionalised.

