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## Theoretical and Practical Aspects of a Self-Regulation and Quality Control System for Dutch Higher Education

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*In the Netherlands a quality control system for higher education is now in its early stages. An important initiative was taken by the Ministry of Education and Science in the HOAK paper (1986). Both the VSNU and the HBO-Raad are now proceeding to develop a quality control system for respectively the universities and the HBO-institutions.*

*The authors of this paper suggest that the process to design such a quality control system should continue over the next few years. Based on the theoretical model of self-regulation as well as on experiences in other countries, they come up with some practical proposals concerning important elements of a quality control system, which will be able to support and stimulate (and not threaten) higher education in the Netherlands.*

### Introduction

Higher education in The Netherlands is in the early stages of building an institution-based, as opposed to a ministry conducted, formal quality control system. This initiative is being taken in response to an offer by the government through the so called HOAK Paper to suspend the Academic Statute through which program approval and basic definition have been controlled by the ministry for the last few decades (1). This is an offer which the universities and polytechnic institutions (HBO schools) can hardly refuse since it holds the promise of a transfer of power to the institutions which would permit them to autonomously define and plan programs and then to implement them in a much shorter time period than has been the case in the past – at least potentially. With the transfer of power, of course, must come an assumption by the institutions of the responsibility to control the quality of the programs so planned and implemented, indeed to become responsible for all aspects of the control of quality for their institutions. The Minister of Science and Education asked that such a system be built as part of the agreement.

Potentially, at least, in systems with a characteristically European distribution of power (in which there is highest power at the ministry level and in the faculties, and lowest amounts at the top of the institution, as compared with the North American situation in which the opposite conditions prevail) (2), the institutions now have the opportunity to secure a large measure of autonomy if they can collaboratively build an acceptable and effective system to systematically and regularly assess their effectiveness, build on their strengths and remedy those things which are found to need such attention. In this article, this opportunity will be explored and the possible responses will be delineated from both theoretical and practical perspectives.

### Some theoretical and historical considerations

The notion of control in a managerial sense is a very fundamental concept. Rather than being limited to the more popular notion of the determination of options or delimitation of action or freedom, control in a managerial sense connotes making assessments of the extent to which the things an organization planned to do, did, in fact, occur, and then using that information to force choices or make plans for the future of the organization. In short, one controls (assesses or checks the results of previous actions) before one plans or takes the next step(s). So, quality control, the name which is evolving for the new initiative in The Netherlands, is a natural and understandable dimension in the act of running anything—a course, a program, a faculty, a school, a university or a whole system of higher education.

In Dutch higher education in recent decades, the control step has been both formal and informal (although the latter had been primarily the case in a managerial sense) and it has been focused at the two levels where the greatest accumulation of power and prerogative were and still are located, at the ministry level and in the individual faculties

of the universities or the polytechnics (HBO schools). At the ministry level for the universities, the control function in a managerial sense, has been attempted via the Academic Statute. This has really been a type of quasi-control which functioned largely by controlling the input and process dimensions of educational programs through a lengthy planning and approval scheme. Output assessment in an educational sense have not been made. Control of administrative functions at institutions has been enacted similarly, with funds (input) and procedure (process) being monitored, but effectiveness not really addressed. The use of positive or negative incentives has recently been adopted as a new strategy by the ministry. In the retrenchment operation of the beginning of the 1980's the ministry for instance used a negative incentive to try to influence the university representatives who were supposed to come up with an acceptable retrenchment proposal (3). For the polytechnics a similar general pattern of interactions between ministry and schools has developed, with a recent dramatic example being the consolidation of the whole system of institutions through mergers being propelled by the threat of negative incentives. In addition, however, there has been for many years, an actual mechanism for assessment of some aspects of the HBO programs by a ministry inspectorate functioning to provide control.

At the level of the faculties within both types of institutions, the control step is present to some extent. Individual professors, of course, make judgements about their instruction and scholarly work and some faculties make collaborative judgements about their programs. In recent years, the perceived need for more choices about the basic activities of the institutions has led in a time of diminished resources to the contingency funding scheme for research which includes collaborative judgements about some part of the scholarly work at Dutch universities. But systematic, regular (cyclical), collaborative assessments of the academic programs and services of Dutch higher education institutions had not been a characteristic of the

system. We would argue that a systematic, university-controlled quality control (in the best and most developmental and comprehensive sense) system could have prevented some of the trauma experienced in the retrenchments by prompting and forcing university choices about programs, services and resources over time yielding both a more effective and efficient system (4). This greater effectiveness and efficiency will be the natural result of the assuring of the autonomy of the professoriate, the faculties and the institutions in this system. Trying to steer a higher education system from above has proved to be a highly costly and not very successful strategy. Only with the sincere collaboration of the professional experts a system of assessment can develop into a mechanism which is directed towards both the assurance and the improvement of quality of higher education (5).

The challenge from the ministry to build a quality control system comes with a positive incentive. If the universities and the polytechnics respond, they will gain much autonomy in program planning and definition. There also is a negative incentive. The ministry has established a new inspectorate for higher education which is 'waiting in the wings' in more than a theatrical sense to begin inspections of the programs of the universities and the polytechnics if they do not build a believable system.

And so, the Dutch institutions through their representative, institutional cooperations, the *VSNU* and *HBO-Raad*, have begun to explore the development of a quality control system. These two representative bodies are proceeding from different historical perspectives and they are of course, working with very different types of institutions—the missions and organizational cultures are quite different. The experience in other countries that have built self (institution controlled) regulation systems seems to indicate that a similar basic system can be applied in each of the Dutch sub-systems. However, the *VSNU* and *HBO-Raad* are starting in different ways. The *VSNU* is

focusing on the use of external visitors. The *HBO-Raad* is starting with self-assessment projects. In addition, the *VSNU* is focusing on the review of faculties or disciplines rather than institutions; what in North America and increasingly elsewhere is called 'program review'. Yet, it seems to these authors that both must and will inevitably move toward a more holistic, unified basic model because of the nature of the academic institution and the work conducted therein. What is this model?

### The basic model

Once the decision to utilize and rely on self-regulation is made, a basic construct is usually employed in the academic world. The elements are as follows. The *purposes* of the mechanism are 1) to provide some assurance to the public that university standards or other standards are being met and that institutional and/or faculty goals are being achieved (quality assurance), and 2) to improve the system over time through individual and collaborative self-discovery and peer pressure. The *procedures* include both internal and external dimensions. The internal dimensions include two aspects: 1) continuing or formative self-assessment and any necessary corrections by individual professors and other professionals, and 2) periodic, collaborative summative self-assessment usually conducted just before the external dimension by the institution and its faculties through existing or specially constituted study groups. This second internal step is the critically important element most institutions must introduce. It is through the internal self-assessment processes that the need for improvement can be perceived and much actual improvement enacted (6). The external aspects of the process involve a visit (evaluation or inspection) conducted by a carefully selected group of highly experienced, unbiased professional peers who examine the institution or program through the written report of self-assessment (internal process) and on-site validation through observation, conversation and gathering of

other material during the two or three day visit.

The oral and written report of the external team and the written report of the self-assessment process from the confidential basis of the improvement process which is then propelled by the leaders of the faculty and the institution in question. They also are the basis of a summary written abstract which can be used by any appropriate government agency and the public as a statement of quality assurance. The latter process is designed to assure the public, not to injure the institution in question. The specific sequence of internal and then external steps specifically allows the institution time to correct or plan for the correction of deficiencies under responsible peer pressure. The system is intended to be supportive, corrective and improvement-oriented; to empower, not to compare institutions or programs or otherwise to disable them. We are convinced that over time this is the best system to use with universities and similar organizations where the public concern is not with issues of health and safety where more inspectorial, expose-oriented, crude, immediate and directive measures are appropriate.

### The ideal model

The complexities of implementing well the foregoing scheme are substantial. In Canada and the United States where substantial self-regulation systems are either preferred or required by the historical circumstances and the realities of power and prerogative, the development of the system has taken at least several cycles or repetitions. The professoriate does not want interference and the institutions want autonomy. The lesser of two evils finally prevails, when the benefits of collaborative, improvement-oriented program and institutional self-regulation become obvious. They are seen as manifold better than government inspection which can be quite arbitrary in its focus, deeply politicized, and often simplistic, disturbing or destructive in many ways.

In the ideal form, the basic model for self-

regulation becomes much more integrated into the fabric of the life of the higher education institution. Quality control and more effective processes are increasingly ensured by regular, ongoing collaborative studies and by external review processes arranged by the institution, not by an outside agency. Planning and choice making in general are dramatically improved because the choices are informed by better information and advice. In the ideal self-regulating university or polytechnic, every academic program or faculty and every administrative unit would be reviewed in a university controlled process at an appropriate time once in a five to seven year cycle. This would involve a self-study of the program or unit and next a visit by a small team of visitors. An appropriately empowered council at the institution would coordinate these studies and visits and help the institution to respond to the experience - to praise, to enhance, to make changes, to shift resources, and to make choices. At the end of this program and faculty review cycle an overall study and planning process would take place to consider institution-wide issues and problems, to make strategic choices, to plan, to consider large financial and governance issues including the future of the institution, all of this being informed by the previous five to seven years of program (faculty) and services reviews. Such a system would not only ensure quality over time, it would provide greater institutional control of the institutional destiny.

In summary, then, the ideal self-regulation system in higher education would have the following attributes:

- The *purpose* would be dual: quality assurance and improvement.
- It would be *institutional-centered*, rather than governmental or comparative.
- It would have *internal* and *external* aspects (self-assessment and external visitors).
- *Self-assessment* would be the cornerstone.
- The *measures of quality* would be both general consensual attributes of quality

(standards of good university practice) and the achievement of stated institutional or program goals.

- The system would be *regular and cyclical*.
- It would be *comprehensive*. All units, processes and programs (faculty and administrative) would be reviewed each five to seven year cycle.
- The process would have *consequences*. The studies and visits would result in action – enhancement or change and perhaps the redistribution of marginal resource – and the review process would inform the institutional planning process.
- The *visits* would be made by unbiased, widely experienced responsible *peers* perhaps augmented by a small percentage of lay citizens or industry representatives.
- The specific results of the studies and visits would be *confidential*, i.e. the property of the institution concerned.
- Any government or other agency would provide *assurance to the public* by agreeing to the nature of the process and by obtaining and responsibly using summary statements about the status of the institution and its programs and the evolution thereof.

The ideal self-regulation system would take a decade or so of serious committed activity of highest priority to achieve in the Netherlands. In addition to the basic difficulties encountered in any higher education system, The Netherlands has not had such a system of collaborative self-assessment and external visits in the past. It is a small country with a relatively high degree of media coverage for the institutions. Language will be a problem in securing a wide pool of experienced, unbiased visitors since crossing national borders must be done to some extent. The levels of both ministerial and autonomous faculty control in the past will be influencing factors, if not barriers. Finally, the sense of urgency about the matter does not seem to fit with the need to develop the system carefully and sequentially over the next decade or so. Time and trust will be needed.

## Some Practical Suggestions

As indicated previously, the *VSNU* and the *HBO-Raad* are proceeding to develop that is being called a quality control system for the university and polytechnic institutions respectively. Each is proceeding somewhat differently. The *VSNU* is focusing primarily on the external dimension first, visits to faculties to be conducted initially on a trial basis in 1988. It has chosen to conduct these visits focusing only on 'education' (instruction and course program) not on research (because of the existing contingency funding scheme for research). It will look at *all* sites for each discipline at all universities simultaneously over a two or three month period with one visiting team (7). The *HBO-Raad* has chosen to stimulate self-assessment (internal) first and has secured some funds to stimulate a small number of self-assessment projects in carefully selected institutions (8). The *VSNU* expects that faculties will discover that self-assessment (internal) would be wise, and the *HBO-Raad* will use visitors (external) at some point in the future.

So the system is starting and all should applaud these initiatives. These authors, however, would respectively suggest that the principals (*VSNU* and *HBO-Raad*) actively continue the design process for the system over the next few years, perhaps in light of the basic and ideal models put forth in this document. The ministry should realize that the development of a self-regulation system that can function to achieve its purposes for a system of universities and polytechnics, which are an important national resource and which took many decades to develop, will require encouragement, support and time. The need to develop expertise and experience at the institutional level and the need to support and protect (rather than to compare) the institutions as they attempt to study themselves and to build the system, are critical elements. Each of the principal initiators, *VSNU* and *HBO-raad*, should carefully set forth purposes for their system and then select procedures such as those

indicated above to achieve them. Both internal and external elements must be present, and institution-centered, improvement-oriented peer processes must be employed or the system will be rejected. All of the barriers to the development of a self-regulation system can be surmounted and all of the problems can be solved. The system can be developed and its fruits realized if people cooperate for the benefit of the higher education system in The Netherlands.

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