

The NVAO and cross-border accreditation

dr ir guy Aelterman

The NVAO (Netherlands-Flemish Accreditation Organisation) has gained experience with cross-border accreditation in three areas, namely:

- within the organisation as such: the NVAO was formed by international treaty between the Netherlands and Flanders;
- in the legal possibilities to carry out cross-border accreditation;
- in the experiences acquired in the co-operation with other quality assurance agencies.

The organisation

The NVAO was formed by treaty on 3 September 2003 as the result of legal initiatives of the Dutch and Flemish governments that were taken as part of the implementation of the Bologna Declaration.

The way chosen was not the easiest one. At the start of the process, the situation in each country was different but comparable. Yet differences not only existed in the past: the situation after the implementation of the Bologna Declaration remains different as well. It is as follows:

- Academic Bachelor's and Master's degrees at the universities in both countries;
- Professional Bachelor's and Master's degrees at the universities of professional education in the Netherlands;
- Professional Bachelor's as well as academic Bachelor's and academic Master's degrees at the universities of professional education in Flanders;
- In principle, Dutch universities may provide (new) professional Bachelor's and Master's degrees, and universities of professional education are entitled to provide academic degrees.

Administrative and public legislation are different in both countries and, last but not least, as a sociologist recently said, "there is no comparable situation in Europe where two border countries share the same language but are culturally so totally different."

This sums up the challenge we are faced with in our effort to create an integrated quality assurance system (QA system) for the two countries.

Both in Flanders and the Netherlands, the NVAO is involved in degree programme accreditation, based on a number of joint principles and procedures :

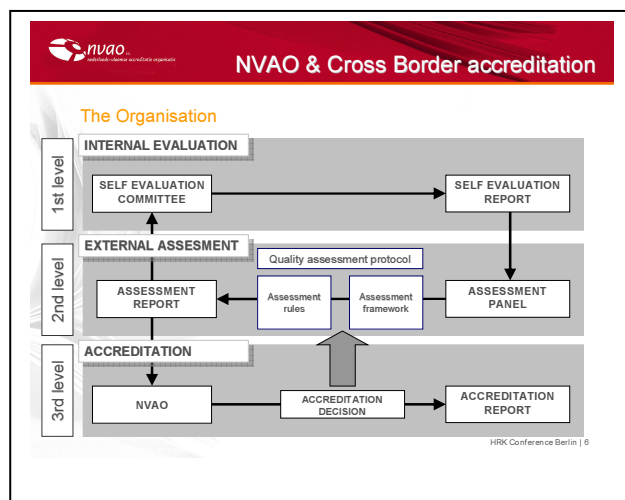
- The first and second level of the QA system consists of the quality improvement cycle.
 - at the first level, an internal self-evaluation report is produced by the university or university of professional education that has applied for accreditation; this report is not disclosed to the public;
 - at the second level, an assessment report is drawn up (external peer review); this report is disclosed to the public.
- The third level of the QA system concerns the decision on awarding accreditation.
 - accreditation is based on the second level of the QA system, not on the first level;
 - the decision is public;
 - the decision is listed in a higher education register (an online database).

The external assessment is based on a framework of standards and rules or procedures that is to be used by the assessment panel. This external assessment panel, the peers, consists of 3 to 5 members and includes a student.

The accreditation decision is a yes or no decision and does not involve ranking.

The accreditation framework consists of three levels: subjects, facets or aspects, and criteria.

There are 6 subjects: aims and objectives; study programme; staff; facilities and provisions; internal quality assurance; and results.



This approach implies that on the one hand a degree of diversity is accepted, as a consequence of the different historical background, and that on the other hand a sufficient level of verification of quality is ensured to allow both countries to mutually recognise each other's accreditation decisions.

An important aspect is that, as the treaty states,

“Graduates of a Dutch or Flemish degree course, that is accredited by the accreditation organisation, are considered to possess a degree certificate of equal value as graduates of a similar Flemish or Dutch accredited degree course, if the relevant higher education degree certificate entitles the graduate to enrol in another course within this higher education. The degree certificate is considered of equal value with respect to admission requirements for the purpose of taking further accredited courses at another Dutch or Flemish institution of higher education.”

This has resulted in the mutual recognition of course programmes and degrees. The latter is facilitated by the support of the ENIC-NARIC agencies.

The legal possibilities to carry out cross-border accreditation

The issues involved in cross-border accreditation are rather complex, but not insoluble if a well-developed generic and legal framework is in place.

In case of accreditation in a cross-border context, there are three aspects that require special attention:

- a. the understanding of the concept of accreditation and its consequences;
- b. the exact situation of the degree course that is to be accredited and the exact purpose of accreditation in the specific case;
- c. the frame of reference within which accreditation takes place.

The understanding of the concept of accreditation and its consequences

The main purpose of cross-border accreditation is the recognition of a degree as a gateway to graduate courses in higher education. But the purposes can be different: an accountability function; accreditation as a prerequisite for government funding; an admission requirement to the profession; etc

The concept of accreditation itself can be interpreted differently as well.

Accreditation is a formal, public statement about a degree course (or institution) (1) by an independent body (2) and based on a qualitative assessment (3) which is itself based on previously agreed standards that have to be met (4). This rather general description already leaves scope for various interpretations and raises questions such as 'what is meant by public?'; 'when is something public?'; and 'what is meant by independent?'

The exact situation of the degree course that is to be accredited and the exact purpose of accreditation in the specific case

In our experience we have come across the following situations:

- the wish to accredit a degree programme on the basis of accreditation awarded by third parties or abroad (a)
- the wish to recognise accreditation of a degree programme abroad that has been accredited by an agency abroad, as is the aim of the ECA (b)
- accreditation by the NVAO of a degree programme that is provided abroad (irrespective of whether it is organised by a, in this case, Flemish or Dutch institution) (c)
- a joint programme that has been accredited by an agency in one country, the accreditation of which is taken over by an agency in another country (d)
- a joint programme that has been accredited jointly by two or more agencies (e)
- bi-certification, possibly including joint accreditation (f)

Under current Flemish regulations, the NVAO has the power to solve cases such as (a) without problems (see case). In the Netherlands, regulations with regard to such matters are in preparation.

Both Flemish and Dutch legislation are currently amended to enable the solution of cases such as (c), (d), (e) and (f).

The frame of reference within which accreditation takes place

This framework includes comparable procedures, standards and guidelines that enable a decision on quality (see cases).

Experiences acquired in the co-operation with other QA agencies

Both as regards the formula of joint accreditation and as regards the adoption of accreditation or mutual recognition, the proper course of action is to follow a standardised and agreed methodology, that involves:

- Analysis of mutual standards and guidelines;
- Recognition of mutual standards and guidelines;
- Recognition of the results of the assessments on both sides;
- Recognition of decisions on awarding accreditation;

The case we are presenting here is the result of a collaborative project between the French CTI and the NVAO. It concerns the assessment and accreditation of courses in

engineering with the purpose to arrive at mutual recognition of decisions on accreditation and/or to carry out joint accreditations.

As stated before, this presupposes detailed knowledge and understanding of both systems, as well as that both systems are sufficiently similar, and that both systems take similar principles and objectives as a starting point. The main thing that all parties should bear in mind is that mutual recognition or joint accreditation can only be achieved on the basis of mutual trust.

In the first phase, which is now concluded, we compared the procedures and criteria for assessment and accreditation for both agencies, within the context of the current higher education systems for degree courses in engineering in the participating countries.

The second phase, which will start this autumn, is a phase of mutual participation (by observers) in the assessment of degree courses in engineering in each of the participating countries (France, the Netherlands, and Flanders).

On the basis of the results obtained in this second phase, conclusions will be drawn and the future course of action to achieve the set goals will be determined.

At this stage, after the first phase, we may conclude that as regards procedures, a number of shared aspects can be observed, but also a number of differences.

Similarly, the majority of the criteria are the same, but a minority is different; this is mainly due to the fact that the systems of higher education in the participating countries differ considerably.

The most essential common features of the accreditation procedures of the NVAO and the accreditation ('habilitation') procedure of CTI can be summarised as follows:

Both CTI and NVAO are public authorities created by law, whose members of the Board (NVAO) and of the Plenary Assembly (CTI) respectively are appointed by the Minister of Education.

Accreditation concerns a degree course (not an institution as a whole) and is valid for a limited period of time.

Accreditation (the decision or proposal to the Minister) is based on a positive quality assessment of the degree course, which itself requires a self-evaluation report of the degree course from the institution.

A set of predetermined quality criteria are applied for the purpose of the assessment.

There are, however, a number of essential differences:

1. Accreditation by the NVAO concerns all Bachelor's and Master's degree courses, whereas accreditation by the CTI only applies to engineering degree courses. NVAO accreditation confirms that the basic quality of the Bachelor's or Master's degree course in a specific discipline is satisfactory, whereas the CTI primarily confirms that the accredited degree course is entitled to award the title of 'ingénieur diplômé'. This difference mainly has consequences for the way the discipline-specific requirements are dealt with. For the CTI, the discipline-specific criteria are an integrated part of its general assessment framework, whereas for the NVAO the discipline-specific criteria are operationalised at the level of the assessment agency and the assessment panel.
2. The NVAO accreditation considers the Bachelor cycle (3 years) and the Master cycle (2 years) as separate entities, and accreditation is granted separately. This implies that the Bachelor's and Master's degree courses have separate identities, even if the Bachelor's

degree course is predominantly or even (almost) exclusively a path leading to the Master's degree course. Nevertheless, the assessment of the Master's and Bachelor's degree courses may be carried out at the same time by the same assessment panel, but a separate (part of the) assessment report is required. The CTI, on the other hand, assesses and accredits the integrated 5-year course.

3. The NVAO is entitled to take the final decision on accreditation. The CTI formulates a proposal to the Minister for public institutions (HEI), and only takes the final decision for private institutions.

4. The CTI Plenary Assembly includes an equal number of representatives of education in engineering and of representatives from the engineering profession. The Board of the NVAO consists of representatives from the field of education (not restricted to engineering), civil society (former politicians) and the professional field (not restricted to engineering) without an a priori rule of parity.

5. The CTI is at the same time an evaluation (assessment) agency and an accreditation agency. The NVAO is an accreditation agency that uses assessments of degree courses carried out by separate evaluation agencies and assessment panels. The NVAO checks the quality of the evaluation agency and of the assessment. In the CTI procedure, the assessment panel consists primarily of CTI members, whereas in the NVAO procedure the assessment panel is completely separate from the NVAO.

6. In the CTI procedure, a negative assessment or the detection of serious shortcomings lead to a shorter accreditation period of 1, 2, or 3 years, depending on the seriousness of the shortcomings. Accreditation cannot be withdrawn until after this period. In the NVAO procedure, the NVAO either grants accreditation (in case of a satisfactory assessment) or not (in case of an unsatisfactory assessment)¹.

7. In the NVAO procedure, the assessment report of the evaluation agency and the accreditation report of the NVAO (that lead to the accreditation decision) are public documents. In the CTI procedure, only the decision itself is made public; the assessment report is not.

8. A strict requirement of the NVAO procedure is that the assessment panel includes a student member. In addition, the input of students of the course is explicitly required in the self-evaluation and during the assessment visit. The CTI assessment panels do not include a student member, but the input of the students is required during the assessment visit. It is not explicitly stated in the *Guide d'autoévaluation* that the input of the students is required at the level of the self-evaluation.

We are currently making similar comparisons for the purpose of adopting decisions on accreditation made by internationally operating QA agencies in the domains of veterinary sciences and economics.

In the process, we have come to the following conclusions:

- Neither the peer review nor the decision on accreditation are disclosed to the public; the decision itself is usually published, but the considerations and argumentation are not;

¹ In Flanders, however, if accreditation is not granted, the government may grant temporary recognition of the degree course for a maximum of three years, on the basis of a plan for improvement submitted by the institution.

- Internal quality assurance is rarely a separate subject in the external assessment report, but the elements of internal quality assurance are included in the discussion of various other subjects;
- The outcomes as such are not discussed as a separate subject for all courses, but elements of this subject can usually be found in various other parts of the report.
-

In most cases the details provided allow a decision on accreditation to be declared equally valid in the other country, or it is possible to take an independent decision.

Important in the whole is

-trust (and that is built up by understanding and recognition of the mutual standards and guidelines);

-understanding the spirit of an accreditation decision rather than the legal letter or interpretation of the rules.