

Assessment in Higher Education

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Assessment in higher education does not get the attention it deserves. The issue receives relatively little notice during site visits. The transparency of the assessment process is not optimal and quality standards are insufficiently robust. Yet the outside world (students, institutions supplying students, advanced-level programmes, the labour market and the authorities) needs to be able to understand the value and meaning of diplomas. Various developments now suggest that the time is right for a renewed focus on higher education assessment.

A renewed focus on higher education assessment

A number of developments lead to different requirements for assessments in the higher education sector: system changes such as the introduction of the bachelors & masters structure and the accreditation system; educational innovations such as competency-based and sandwich approaches; the substantial growth in the number of higher education graduates (50% participation target) and lifelong learning. Nowadays, there is a greater variety of learning paths in higher education, which necessitates improved clarity about student outcomes. Institutions need to establish clear requirements for transparency and quality assurance in assessment practices.

Current practices in assessment according to the providers of over 1.200 higher education programmes

As part of the advice-giving process, representatives of over 1.200 publicly-funded and designated higher education programmes (higher professional education and university education) provided information about their assessment practices. This study, conducted by ITS/IOWO, shows that most institutions operate predominantly traditional assessment methods. Assessments focus on knowledge acquisition and are held at set times. In addition, current practices, notably within the university sector, tend to be inward-looking. Assessment is programme-based, with little external quality assurance and limited involvement of external experts. However, changes have been initiated, especially within the higher professional education sector. New forms of assessment such as the portfolio and continuous assessment have been introduced alongside existing, more traditional practices. Also, opportunities have been created for students to take assessments at flexible times, for instance under the Competencies-Gained-Elsewhere Scheme and the so-called Side-Entry Scheme. The study also reveals that assessment triggers educational innovation. These and other findings can be found in the report 'Looking Outward: Transparency and Quality Assurance in Higher Education Assessment' (*De blik naar buiten: transparantie en kwaliteitsborging van examinering in het hoger onderwijs*), which is being published concurrently with this advisory report.

Current assessment practices in higher education according to visitation and inspection reports

The Education Council analysed 10 recent visitation reports on higher professional education and 10 reports on university education. These reports show that assessment receives relatively little attention during site visits, and that current assessment practices are insufficiently transparent. Criteria are often not spelled out in advance so marker judgements tend to be subjective. Furthermore, quality assurance of the assessment process is not a high priority. Recent Inspectorate of Education reports paint a similar picture and argue in favour of a more coherent quality assurance process; an increased

focus on assessment during site visits and the accreditation review period; and of strengthening the position of exam committees.

Conclusions and recommendations

The assessment process in higher education is frequently insufficiently transparent and lacks quality assurance. Improvements are desirable in order for qualifications to gain wider recognition. What improvements are needed to enhance the transparency and assure the quality of the assessment process?

The key recommendations of the Education Council are set out below. They do not necessarily fit within the existing legal framework, because new legislation is in preparation. Furthermore, the Council holds the view that primary responsibility for assessment in higher education rests with the educational institution, and that higher education providers are independent and have academic freedom and institutional autonomy. They enjoy considerable freedom in shaping educational provision and have primary responsibility for the quality of their programmes and the development of a quality control system. The legislature, however, has restricted this freedom in two ways: by stipulating the establishment of exam committees and the introduction of an accreditation system. The Council has sought to align its advice with these two stipulations.

1) Positioning of exam committees

The Council recommends bolstering the position of exam committees by increasing their autonomy. The exam committees should become responsible for overseeing the assessment process, and they should become accountable to internal and external stakeholders for the assessment methods used. The committee should devise the assessment policy and it should be involved in determining the student's final grade.

The Council offers pointers for the activities of the exam committees. Transparency may be improved by addressing the inward-looking focus of assessment practices, for example by involving more external experts in a student's final assessment. In the higher professional education sector, representatives of the professions and colleagues from other institutions or representatives of advanced-level programmes (for instance representatives of master's degree programmes assessing bachelor's students) should be given a seat on the exam committees. The exam committees in the university sector should be extended to include colleagues from other (national and international) universities, representatives of advanced-level programmes and colleagues / researchers employed outside academia. Transparency may also be enhanced by making final judgements of student work less teacher-dependent and subjective, thus creating a clearer distinction between teaching and assessment: the teacher or tutor should never have sole responsibility for assigning final grades.

Both these measures will result in improved accountability of higher education institutions for the assessment process. The inclusion of assessment in performance-based funding arrangements may lead to a separation of teaching and assessment. This measure is to come on top of the separation of management and teaching. Managers, who are responsible for financial functions, should not serve on exam committees.

2) Tightening of accreditation protocols

The Council seeks to give more weight to the assessment issue by bolstering the role and responsibilities of exam committees. It also recommends that the programme accreditation process should place more importance on this issue. At present, a negative rating for the assessment component does not necessarily entail a negative final rating for the programme. The Council seeks to change this situation, especially since research finds

that the higher education sector's assessment policies are mainly driven by legislation, regulation and quality frameworks. Assessment policy should be included in the accreditation protocol used by the Netherlands Flemish Accrediting Body (NVAO). A negative rating for assessment policy should result in a negative quality rating or a negative accreditation decision. This measure should incentivise higher education institutions to provide more transparent and good-quality assessments.

3) Certification of Competencies Gained Elsewhere (EVCs)

In the higher education sector, assessments should be integrated into the life-long learning process. Learners should be able to gain formal recognition for their EVCs so as to be awarded certificates for or exemptions from one or more programme and exam components. Work experience and prior learning should be formally recognised. The certificates and exemptions should enable learners to pursue short-track study programmes. The Council recommends introducing legislation that will establish higher education providers as learning-path-independent certifying bodies.

4) Implementation path

The advisory report concludes by outlining the steps in the process of implementing the above recommendations. Transparent and good-quality assessments should be covered in an amended or new higher education act. The implementation process should be aligned with European developments related to mobility and harmonisation.