

On the move towards accreditation?

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Abstract: *The department of electromechanical engineering of the Karel de Grote-Hogeschool is gradually moving towards accreditation. This means that next to the development of the new bachelor and master curriculum, a self-evaluation report is written. This report will be the basis of an external quality assessment. The assessment agency of Flanders will publish a public report. The accreditation organisation evaluates the thoroughness of the external quality assessment and accepts or rejects its findings. A positive decision results in the recognition of the programme for 8 years.*

Key words: *accreditation, self-evaluation report, external quality assessment.*

INTRODUCTION

By signing the Bologna Declaration the Flemish Minister of Education started the transformation of the higher education system in Flanders. One of the results was the introduction in Flanders, as in other parts of Europe, of an accreditation system. Every institute for higher education has to describe for every field of study the way in which it is organised. Based on a so called "self-evaluation report" a team of experts gets an idea of the strengths and weaknesses of a department and the study ("degree course" or "study programme") it organizes. After a visit "on site" (audit), the team produces an official and public report. This report is an important element for the "Accreditation Organisation of The Netherlands and Flanders" (NVAO) to decide whether the department fulfils the basic demands needed to be able to organize studies in higher education. A department can only issue an official diploma if the study programme is accredited.

The department of electromechanical engineering, which is part of the faculty of Industrial Sciences and Technology, is one of the departments of the Karel de Grote-Hogeschool (KdG) preparing such a self-evaluation report. Meanwhile this department is also transforming the existing curriculum into the Academic Bachelor/Master degree structure. This process is not only based on defining competences, didactic methods and assessment methods, but also on embedding education in research.

In this paper we describe the different steps towards accreditation, the steps already realised in our department and of course some of our experiences.

WHAT'S ACCREDITATION?

"Accreditation means *awarding a hallmark that indicates that certain quality standards have been satisfied*" (Reference [4]). "*Accreditation is the formal recognition of a programme based on a decision of an independent quality assurance agency, which verifies whether this programme meets the pre-determined minimal quality requirements. This quality mark guarantees that the graduate has acquired general and specific competences associated with an internationally recognized Bachelor's or Master's degree*" (Reference [2]). In Flanders (and also in the Netherlands) accreditation in higher education is at the level of the programmes of study and not at the level of the institute. This means that every study programme (in our faculty we have ten, in KdG about forty) is the subject of an accreditation procedure. Accreditation is very important for a study programme, because the government's funding of a bachelor or master degree programme is linked to it. Accreditation is also a precondition for the right of awarding recognized diplomas.

ACCREDITATION NEEDS A FRAMEWORK

Since the system of accreditation is new, universities, departments, assessing institutes, etc. need grip during the process. Therefore the NVAO developed an accreditation framework (Reference [3]). This consists of an assessment framework, some rules for accreditation, criteria for assessment of the followed procedure and of the

report of the Visiting and Assessing Institution (VAI) and a description of the procedure used for accreditation.

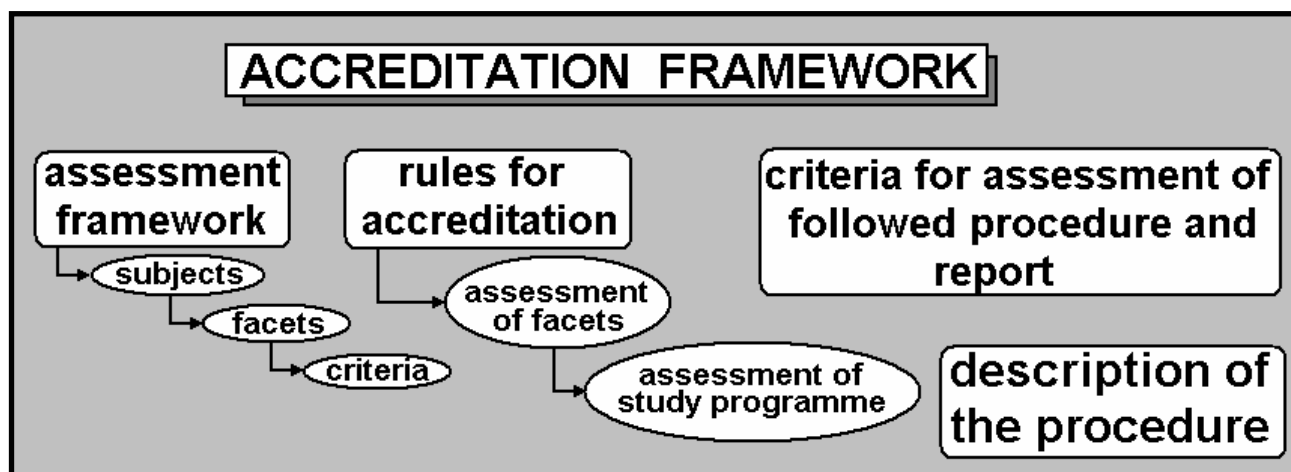


Figure 1: The accreditation framework.

The **assessment framework** consists of six *subjects*, subdivided into facets with corresponding *criteria*. The six subjects, in the light of which the assessment of a study programme is done, are:

- 1) *Aims and objectives of the study programme;*
- 2) *Content and structure of the study programme;*
- 3) *Staff commitment ("deployment of staff");*
- 4) *Facilities ("and provisions");*
- 5) *Internal quality assurance;*
- 6) *Results.*

The first subject is subdivided into the following facets: domain-specific requirements, level (Bachelor and Master) and orientation ("University of Professional Education" or "University"). The criterion linked to the first subject is "*The final qualifications of the degree course correspond to the requirements made to a degree course in the relevant domain ("field of study/discipline and/or professional practice) by colleagues in the Netherlands and abroad and the professional practice*" (Reference [3]). Together with colleagues of other universities, our department has developed a paper in which we describe this criterion in a more concrete way. This paper will help us to define more accurately to what extent we realise this criterion.

The first and second subjects are directly related to the curriculum of a study programme. In our department we started by defining five main objectives (based on our mission: "**Current durable enterprising**"). To these objectives we linked competences. The accreditation framework already gave some competences, but we also used other sources. After having reached an agreement in our department concerning the list of competences, we linked them to the courses ("matrix of competences "). At the moment we are assigning didactic methods and assessment methods to the competences. We are also looking for "white belts" ("missing links") in the matrix.

One of the facets of subject five is "Involvement of staff, students, alumni and the professional field". The criterion linked to this facet is "*Staff, students, alumni and the professional field in which graduates of the course are to be employed are actively involved in the internal quality assurance*" (Reference [3]). We try to realise this criterion by organising inquiries on a regular basis. Our inquiries are related to job satisfaction of

the staff (focus on staff), the teaching processes (focus on students and alumni), expectations of industry (focus on professional field and alumni), etc. These inquiries confront us with our strengths and weaknesses. Lots of improvement projects start from the results of these inquiries. To get more insight into the problems, we work with focus groups and a “departmental commission”. During the meetings with them the results of the inquiries are analysed. The “departmental commission” was also involved in the definition of our competences.

The **rules for accreditation** describe the scale used by the VAI for their assessment of the facets: excellent, good, satisfactory and unsatisfactory. The assessment per subject is generated by determining the assessments of the individual facets. A subject can be marked as satisfactory or unsatisfactory. Each subject must be marked at least satisfactory to get a positive final assessment. The VAI has to motivate its conclusions based on the accreditation framework and their own frame of reference.

The VAI produces a report on the quality of the study programme. This report also describes the **procedure** followed by the VAI. This is important, because the NVAO will **assess** this **report** to determine whether it is possible to decide on the accreditation of the study programme based on this report. The report must provide evidence to justify the conclusions. Another part of the report must give information about the quality of the panel of experts that did the assessment. Size and constitution of the panel, knowledge, experience and independence of the members must be mentioned. The panel of experts must have expertise and authority.

STEPS TOWARDS ACCREDITATION

The process of accreditation of a study programme consists of three levels. In figure 2 these levels are visualized (based on reference [5]).

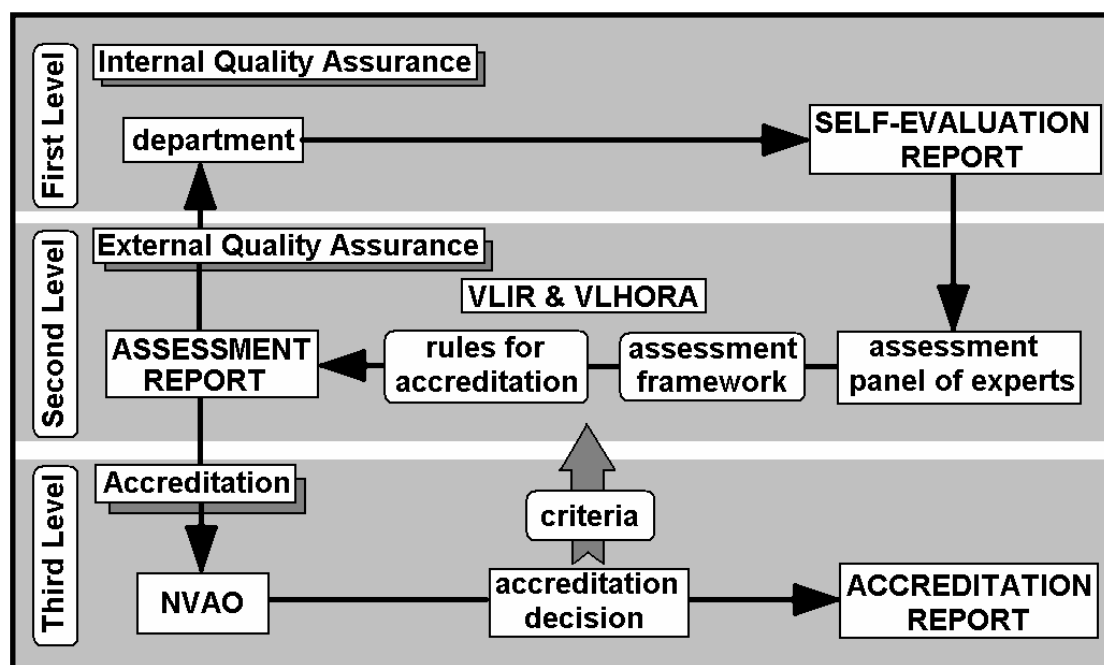


Figure 2: Total Quality Assurance system for higher education in Flanders.

The first level is situated in the department that wants to get the accreditation for its study programme (“Internal Quality Assurance”). The department carries out a self-assessment and develops a self-evaluation report. This report contains a description and

an assessment of the study programme. At least the subjects, facets and criteria of the accreditation framework should be taken into account.

At the second level the Visiting and Assessing Institution (VAI) organizes the external assessment ("External Quality Assurance"). In Flanders this is carried out by the VLIR ("Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad", "Flemish Interuniversity Council") and VLHORA ("Vlaamse Hogescholenraad"). They are setting up an independent assessment panel of experts responsible for assessing all the programmes in a certain field of study. An assessment panel consists of experts in the field of study, experts in education/pedagogy, experts in quality assurance and experts in the international development of the field of study. The students are also represented in the assessment panel. The assessment panel studies the self-evaluation report and prepares a visit to the campus where the course programme is organised. The result of this "external audit" is written in a public assessment-report. The framework for accreditation is of course the backbone of this report.

The third level starts with an application by the department to the NVAO for accreditation of the course programme. The report of the VAI is attached to the application. The NVAO assesses this report. If necessary they ask for more information. Within three months, the NVAO decides whether they award accreditation or not. The department can submit objections against a decision. A positive accreditation decision results in the recognition of the course programme and is kept or listed in the Higher Education Register for eight years (Reference [5]). Funding of the bachelor or master degree and study financing for students are only possible if a course programme is accredited. A course programme which has not been accredited will be deleted from the Higher Education Register and the department cannot grant a recognised degree.

INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION OF ACCREDITATION

In 1999 more than thirty European countries decided to implement the bachelor/master degree structure in higher education ("The Bologna Declaration"). The objective was a more comparable system of higher education, which results in easier student exchange, better preparation for the international labour market, etc. Making the education system transparent is one thing, but can we still guarantee the quality of the programmes of study? In this respect quality assessment and accreditation in an international dimension are also necessary.

But it doesn't make any sense to come to a system of multiple accreditations for programmes. There is an indisputable need for a mutual recognition of accreditation decisions in Europe. The ultimate aim of the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA) is to achieve mutual recognition of accreditation decisions among the participants before the end of 2007 (Reference [1]). The ECA worked out a road map to reach this goal. Some members of the ECA already signed a joint declaration on the automatic recognition of accredited qualifications.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

A transitional accreditation for programmes of study was provided to prevent all programmes of study from having to submit their application for accreditation within the same limited period of time. For an institute as Karel de Grote, or even for a part of it (e.g. the faculty of Industrial Sciences and Technology), it would be impossible to start the process in all programmes of study at the same time. The fact that some programmes of study are pioneers helps us to develop a kind of procedure from which other programmes of study can also benefit. The development of such a procedure helps us to integrate the whole process of accreditation in our everyday job. *On the move towards accreditation.*

In our faculty we have a long tradition of Total Quality Management. One of the actions during the last ten years was the introduction of a tool to visualise continuous

improvement projects. Because people didn't deem it important to show others their improvement projects, the success of that action was rather limited. Since the start of the new accreditation system, we notice that colleagues are more aware of the fact that it doesn't suffice to realise quality; it must also be systematic and traceable. *On the move, thanks to accreditation.*

The new system of accreditation is very expensive. Even if we only take the direct costs of an assessment (second level) into account: six experts during several days need good accommodation, salary, etc. It's the institute or department receiving these experts that has to pay the bill. The minister of education did not provide supplementary funds. *On the move ... ?*

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