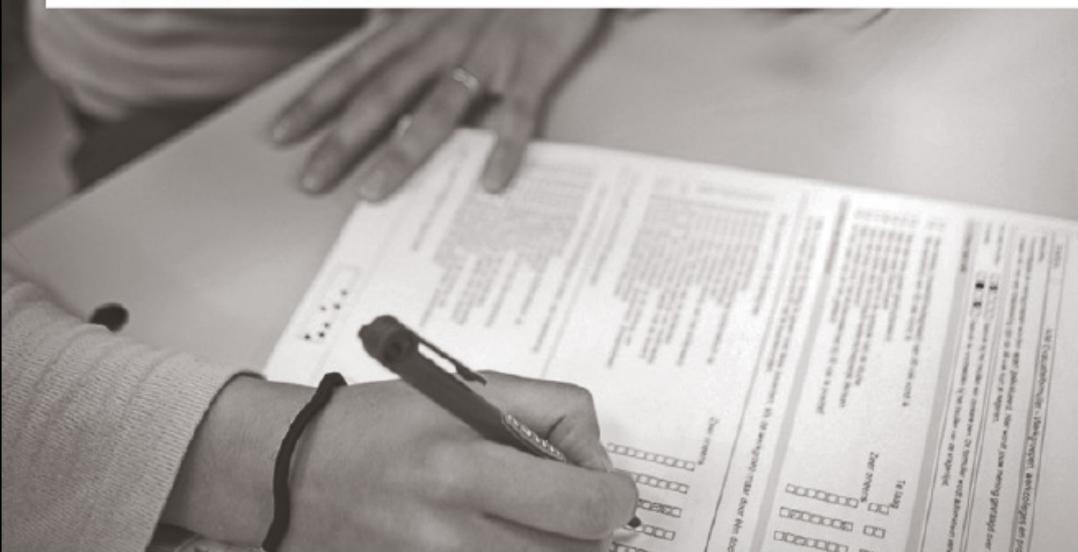




# Quality Assurance Framework

University Policy Papers



*Disclaimer:* This translation is provided for information purposes only. In the event of a difference of interpretation, the original Dutch version of this document is binding.

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# 1. Introduction

Working on improving the quality of education is an ongoing focus at the University of Amsterdam (UvA). To ensure that improvement occurs systematically, the principles of a quality assurance system were set out in the Internal Quality Assurance Framework in 1999. This Framework was modified in subsequent years following the introduction of the accreditation system in 2003 and various internal audits that looked at the application of the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle. Changes to the accreditation legislation as of 1 January 2011 and the establishment of a new *Strategic Plan* for the period 2011-2014 provided the immediate impetus for a further update of the quality policy and the quality assurance system.

Under the new legislation, the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) gives institutions the opportunity to apply for an institutional audit. The UvA applied to take part in an institutional audit in February 2011. Under such an audit, the NVAO checks whether an institution has implemented a quality assurance system that will guarantee the quality of the degree programmes offered. The key question is therefore: 'Is the institution in control?' This key question is broken down into a further five questions:

1. What is the vision of the institution regarding the quality of the education it provides?
2. How does the institution intend to realise this vision?
3. How does the institution measure the degree to which this vision is realised?
4. How is the institution working towards effecting improvements?
5. Who is responsible for what?

For the UvA, this essentially means the following. The Executive Board determines the vision, together with relevant policy frameworks. The faculty then formulates policy in line with this vision. The educational institute works out the details of this policy. The various processes and procedures at the course and degree programme level must ultimately all fall within this policy. The above five questions therefore suggest a cyclical quality assurance system at the different levels (from institution to degree programme), making it possible to guarantee quality at the programme level.

This Framework again sets out the quality policy of the UvA. There have been no changes to the principles of the quality policy and the desired quality assurance system vis-à-vis the quality policy formulated in 1999, 2004 and 2006. However, the wording has been made more precise and has been modified on several points to reflect the new context.

This policy paper starts by describing the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle (Section 2) and how this is organised at the level of course, degree programme, College or Graduate School, faculty and the institution as a whole (Section 3). Section 4 outlines the role of the various bodies involved in quality assurance, such as the Boards of Studies and the Examinations Boards. Section 5 explores the safeguards of the quality assurance system itself. Quality assurance can only lead to quality improvement if it focuses on substantive issues – namely, degree programmes, staff and facilities. The final section (Section 6) therefore takes a closer look at the specific forms that quality assurance may take in these areas.

## 2. The quality assurance system

### 2.1. Why quality assurance?

An institution employs integrated quality assurance in order to make improvements to the education it provides. It does so primarily because of a desire to satisfy its own quality standards, but also because this is required by outside parties. Improvements firstly target the primary process (the degree programmes). However, these programmes do not stand alone; their quality is in part determined by related factors (strategic policy, staffing policy, the way teaching is organised, the deployment of resources). Improvements should therefore also target the organisation as a whole. To do so in a systematic, robust and coherent manner, the institution needs a quality system that allows it to continuously monitor, ensure and improve the quality of its programmes.

Quality assurance begins by asking two fundamental questions:

1. Are we doing the right things?
2. Are we doing these things in the right way?

The first question relates to defining the quality that an institution seeks to achieve, while the second involves establishing the quality that has been achieved. These questions in turn generate a further three questions:

3. How do we know this? (measurement and accountability)
4. Do others feel the same? (external validation)
5. What do we do with this knowledge? (consolidation or improvement)

Or, put differently: ‘The institution says what it does, then demonstrates that it does what it says.’

An institution uses the quality assurance system to systematically establish the answers to these questions. It is important to point out that a quality assurance system is not an end in itself, but rather a means to an end. An institution only needs to establish those matters that will enable it to run smoothly and achieve its stated goals. This is what makes an institution transparent.

The above suggests that a well-functioning quality assurance system will produce a high-quality product, in this case ‘education’. This link can be made because quality is a dynamic concept. Education needs to keep pace with changing circumstances inside and outside the university. In other words, the focus here is not on a product with a static form of quality, but on a process for delivering high quality.

### **Quality assurance and quality**

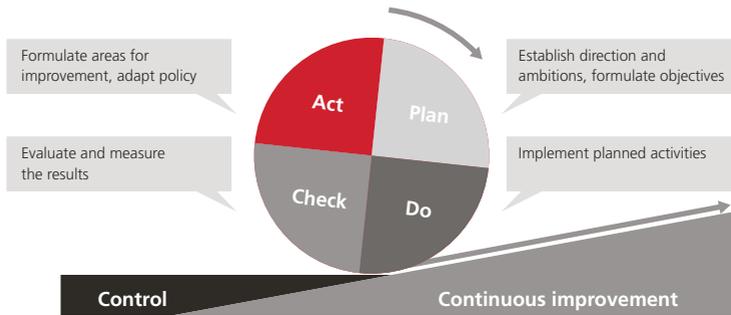
In its accreditation system framework, the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) describes the relationship between quality assurance and quality as follows:

*The object of the institutional quality assurance assessment is to determine whether the board of an institution has implemented an effective quality assurance system, based on its vision of the quality of the education provided, which enables it to guarantee the quality of the programmes offered.*

## **2.2. The quality assurance system at the UvA**

### **2.2.1. Continuous improvement: the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle**

In organisations that apply quality assurance, continuous improvement of quality is key. This process of continuous improvement is reflected in Deming’s improvement cycle, known as the Plan-Do-Check-Act or PDCA cycle. A systematic PDCA approach leads to quality control, quality assurance and quality improvement, as shown in Figure 1 on page 6.



**Figure 1.** The PDCA cycle: progressing through the different stages of the cycle should lead to continuous improvement.

The cycle involves the following four steps:

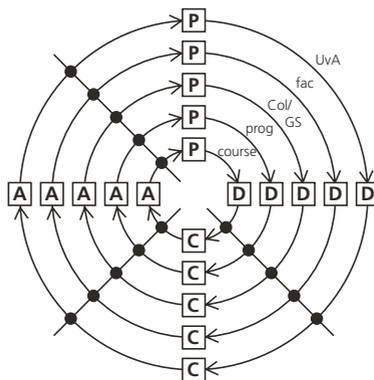
1. *Plan*: establish direction and ambitions, develop and work out the details of policy in accordance with objectives, and plan activities based on a systematic analysis of the environment and the available resources
2. *Do*: implement the planned activities
3. *Check*: evaluate the implementation, measure the results, critically reflect on the results and compare the outcomes with the stated goals
4. *Act*: draw conclusions and formulate points for improvement, modify plans where necessary and/or formulate objectives for the period ahead. Once the objective has been achieved, it is important to safeguard the policy, in which case the A stands for *Adapt*.

For a smooth progression through the PDCA cycle, objectives need to be worded as specifically as possible and plans/improvement plans drawn up in such a way as to leave no doubt about how they should be implemented. The *Plan* stage should state how the results will be evaluated in the *Check* stage. The aim here is to make it possible to retrospectively identify the cause of any disappointing results and then to implement concrete improvement measures.

Each organisational level at the UvA (university, faculty, College or Graduate School, degree programme, course) has its own PDCA cycle (see also Section 3).

To ensure quality improvement, the full cycle must be implemented at each of

these organisational levels. For effective results, there must be a clear coherence between the policies at the different levels. Under the accreditation scheme introduced in January 2011, this element of coherence plays a much greater role than under the previous system. The institutional audit (also known as the ‘institutional quality assurance assessment’) uses audit trails relating to particular aspects to check how the institution’s vision is translated into the individual degree programmes. Examples of audit trails are internationalisation and assessment policy. This does not mean that every degree programme has to interpret internationalisation or assessment policy in the same way, but their interpretation must dovetail with policy frameworks established at the central level.



**2.2.2. Quality assurance: integrated, systematic, transparent and coherent**

Quality assurance will function in an integrated, systematic, transparent and coherent manner, provided:

1. *All aspects of the quality of the programmes offered are addressed coherently as part of quality assurance.* The NVAO frameworks for an institutional audit and for degree programme assessments serve as points of reference.
2. *A link is made between activities undertaken at the different levels with respect to the quality of the programmes offered and improving the quality of these programmes.* A prerequisite for this is a clear division of responsibilities

between the different management levels with regard to the quality of the programmes. The connection between quality assurance activities at these levels can be improved through a set of agreements regarding the form of communication (plans and reports).

3. *Transparent procedures are adopted at all levels in accordance with the PDCA cycle.* This will prevent an ad hoc approach in which targets and criteria are constantly shifting, thus making it difficult in retrospect to establish unequivocally whether the intended outcomes have been achieved.
4. *Where possible, agreements regarding implementing quality assurance activities are clearly laid down,* for example in a quality handbook or evaluation plan.

### **2.3. The relationship between quality assurance and accreditation**

*Quality assurance* is entirely the responsibility and property of the University of Amsterdam, and, within the university, of the faculties, Colleges and Schools and degree programmes. At each level, ambitions are articulated, goals are identified, processes are established and assessments are made as to where improvements are needed. When external stakeholders are involved (such as employers, alumni, advisory councils), decisions are also made at each level about where, when and how improvement measures should be deployed, on the basis of measurements or judgements.

*Accreditation* is a one-off evaluation by an external party (NVAO) that periodically appraises the institution and degree programmes in terms of level of ambition, organisation of processes and results. At the institutional level, this mainly involves the institution's vision on teaching and learning, how this translates into the degree programmes, and the quality assurance system. At the degree programme level, it entails the ambitions and objectives of the degree programme, how the programme is organised and the achieved learning outcomes. This evaluation has binding consequences (either immediately or following a so-called 'recovery period'). If the institutional audit produces a negative result, the institution loses the right to have its degree programmes accredited through the limited programme assessment framework. If the assessment of a degree programme produces a negative judgement, the right to funding and the recognition of the associated qualification expires.

### 2.3.1. Level of ambition

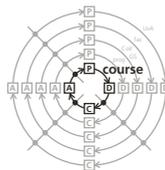
The quality criteria that the UvA and its degree programmes set for themselves must at least satisfy the strategic objectives and vision of the UvA and the requirements laid down by law or in the accreditation framework. The ambition level of the UvA is outlined in the *Strategic Plan*, the *Vision on Teaching and Learning*, covenants and the resulting policy frameworks. These ambitions are translated through to the level of the degree programmes. Additional objectives arising from agreements with third parties may also be formulated at the programme level or per discipline, such as specific requirements set by the professional field (e.g. dentistry, medicine, law).

## 3. The PDCA cycle at different levels

Each organisational level within an institution has at least one Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle of its own. This section describes this cycle in more detail for each level. It also sets out for each level where the final responsibility lies for implementing the relevant cycle and what these responsibilities involve in broad terms. Alongside the final responsibilities mentioned in this section for each level, various bodies are involved in the quality assurance of education. These will be discussed in Section 4.

The Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW) and the institutional management and administration regulations broadly stipulate how the institution's structure is arranged and the division of responsibilities. They also state who at the various levels carries final responsibility for the quality of education and quality assurance with respect to the programmes. How the responsibilities and partial responsibilities are defined for each level must be described in the quality handbooks (*kwaliteitshandboeken*) of the Colleges and Schools.

### 3.1. Course (curriculum component)



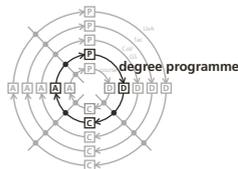
The smallest entity to which the quality assurance cycle is applied is the individual curriculum component (a course, work placement, thesis, etc.). Lecturers are involved in quality assurance as teachers and because of their subject matter and pedagogical expertise. Lecturers or course coordinators are responsible for the content, design and delivery of the module within the frameworks of the curriculum, the educational aim and the organisational

context of the degree programme, and for supervising students (in terms of content) during teaching delivery. They ensure the quality of the programme by coordinating and evaluating the various curriculum components within the programme with other lecturers (and students). Lecturers make adjustments to the component on the basis of the evaluation results, incorporating advice from the Board of Studies, if any.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of the PDCA cycle, the person who carries final responsibility for a curriculum component is responsible for:

- Plan: formulating the learning outcomes for the component and the design and assessment of the curriculum component
- Do: implementing the curriculum component
- Check: checking the course evaluation and advice, if any, from the Board of Studies
- Act: adapting the component in accordance with possible advice from the Board of Studies

### 3.2. Degree programme



A degree programme in fact has two PDCA cycles. One is an annual cycle, where an assessment is made of whether the programme has a coherent curriculum and a feasible study load. This assessment is largely carried out on the basis of course, year and curriculum evaluations. The other cycle is less strictly defined in terms of time, but involves a periodic assessment of whether the programme satisfies the UvA quality standard and educates its students to the appropriate level by testing this level (learning outcomes) against international standards and the requirements of the professional field. Among the

<sup>1</sup> 'Evaluation' refers to all forms of evaluation (written evaluations, panel discussions, etc).

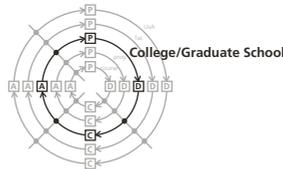
instruments used to gauge this are the results of the curriculum evaluations made by students and lecturers, the student satisfaction monitor, the views of alumni and the professional field, and national and international benchmarking of degree programmes.<sup>2</sup>

The programme director is responsible for the structure and quality of the programme. This includes responsibility for the accreditation of the programme once every six years. To this end, the programme director liaises with lecturers, students and the Board of Studies.

In terms of the PDCA cycle, these responsibilities can be translated as follows:

- Plan: formulating learning outcomes and designing the programme, resulting in approved Teaching and Examination Regulations (OERs)
- Do: implementing the curriculum
- Check: checking curriculum evaluations, the student satisfaction monitor, alumni, professional field, benchmarking
- Act: adapting the curriculum

### 3.3. College or Graduate School



The College or Graduate School is the entity within the UvA where central and faculty policy is translated into the degree programmes. The PDCA cycle of the College or Graduate School is primarily concerned with the quality of the programmes and with monitoring the range of programmes on offer in the light of external developments (faculty, university, government policy).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Section 6 looks more closely at ways in which a degree programme can shape quality assurance at the programme level.

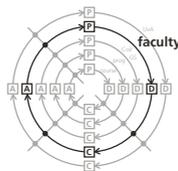
<sup>3</sup> For the Graduate Schools, this includes the teaching within the PhD programmes.

The director of the College or Graduate School (*onderwijsdirecteur*) is the link between the degree programmes and the rest of the organisation, both within the faculty (department, research institute, dean) and within the institution (shared service units, other Colleges and Schools and, where appropriate, central staff and the Executive Board) and is therefore responsible for aligning the range of degree programmes with internal and external developments. Within the frameworks of the UvA's *Vision on Teaching and Learning* and the covenant, the director of the College or Graduate School draws up an annual teaching plan for his or her College or School. The results achieved and the improvement plans are set out in an annual report on education (*onderwijsjaarverslag*), which is discussed by the dean and College or Graduate School director.

In terms of the PDCA cycle, these responsibilities entail:

- Plan: drawing up an annual teaching plan
- Do: implementing the annual teaching plan, deciding which lecturers will deliver the teaching
- Check: checking the annual report on education, the student satisfaction monitor, annual consultations (*jaargesprekken*) with lecturers (via the department chair)
- Act: adapting the annual plan and staffing

### 3.4. Faculty



The main PDCA cycle for quality assurance at the faculty level is the four-year covenant cycle. The faculty establishes, funds and facilitates faculty policy, as well as the strategy that serves as a framework for the Colleges and Graduate Schools. This policy is aligned with institutional policy via the Covenant with the Executive Board. Within the four-year covenant cycle there is an annual cycle to monitor progress on the themes and objectives set out in the Covenant. Monitoring occurs through the

Periodic Executive Council and Executive Council meetings on the one hand and the annual plans and reports of the Colleges and Graduate Schools on the other.

The dean of a faculty is charged with the general management of the faculty and is responsible for the programmes, research, staff and resources in his/her faculty. This includes responsibility for shaping cooperation between College and Graduate School directors, research directors, department chairs and, where applicable, heads of teaching service centres. It is precisely at this level that the link between organisational aspects (staffing policy, operational management, IT policy) and quality of education is so important.

Quality assurance at the faculty level also receives secondary support through the financial PDCA cycle (planning & control). The budget, the four-monthly reports (In Control Memorandums, or ICMs) and the directors' reports are also expected to link quality objectives and resources. Through this linkage the cycle can function as a secondary quality safeguard. Wherever possible, financial and non-financial planning and reporting are carried out in conjunction with each other.

In terms of the PDCA cycle, this means:

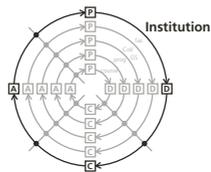
- Plan: drawing up the covenant, setting frameworks for annual plans of the Colleges and Graduate Schools
- Do: translating the covenant into the Colleges and Graduate Schools through an annual plan, and establishing the Teaching and Examination Regulations and budgets for the Colleges and Graduate Schools
- Check: checking the faculty annual report (including key performance indicators), Periodic Executive Council meetings, management reports, student satisfaction monitor, staff monitor, complaints (if any), annual reports on education from the Colleges and Graduate Schools
- Act: adapting policy following advice from the University Committee on Education (UCO) based on discussion of the annual report; agreeing a new covenant once every four years

### The Executive Council (CBO)

Within the context of the Executive Council (*Centraal Bestuurlijk Overleg*, CBO), the Executive Board consults with the deans on general principles relating to research, teaching and operational management, based on the University's strategic profiling and the objectives arising from it as set out in the Strategic Plan and other documents.

*Article 4, Management and Administration Regulations*

## 3.5. Institution



The most important cycle in the quality assurance of education at the institutional level is the four-year *Strategic Plan* cycle. Policy for the next four years is driven by the vision and objectives set out in the *Strategic Plan* and in the *Vision on Teaching and Learning* arising from it. The central educational policy must cohere with other central policy areas such as finance, staffing and communications. It should also tie in with the policies of external parties, such as the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and partner institutions (perhaps via umbrella consultations), but also with faculty policy. The annual report presents an overall account of progress.

The Executive Board is responsible for the education and student policy and budgeting at the institutional level, as well as for the general management of the university. The first responsibility means that it has its own substantive role regarding the quality of the programmes. The second entails an executive role with respect to the tasks of the deans. The Executive Board can issue guidelines to the deans concerning the coordination and organisation of programmes. Guidance is provided through the *Strategic Plan*, the covenants with the faculties and the shared service units, and through periodic consultations such as the Periodic Executive Council and Executive Council meetings. In addition, the Executive Board

facilitates the PDCA cycle at all levels by maintaining the university's system of control and management information (UvAdata).

Quality assurance at the institutional level also receives secondary support through the financial planning and control cycle. For the UvA as a whole, this involves the budget, the half-yearly report, the four- and eight-monthly reports and the Annual Report/Annual Statement of Accounts. Once again, a link is established wherever possible between financial and non-financial objectives. Financial and non-financial planning and reports are carried out in conjunction with each other.

In terms of the PDCA cycle this involves:

- Plan: drawing up the *Strategic Plan* and the *Vision on Teaching and Learning*
- Do: working out the details of the *Strategic Plan* and the *Vision on Teaching and Learning* in accordance with policy frameworks
- Check: checking Periodic Executive Council meetings, management reports, annual reports
- Act: revising the *Strategic Plan* and the *Vision on Teaching and Learning* on the basis of the results achieved

## 4. Other stakeholders in the quality assurance of education

Students and lecturers are of course all involved in the quality assurance of their degree programme. Students give feedback on the quality of the programme through surveys, panel discussions and other bodies, and lecturers are involved in quality assurance through their teaching, which is then evaluated and which they improve where necessary.

Some students and lecturers are more closely involved in the quality assurance of education through membership in a committee or representative or advisory body. This section discusses these committees and bodies. It also touches briefly on the involvement of the professional field and alumni in the quality assurance of education.

### 4.1. Board of Studies

The Board of Studies of a degree programme or cluster of degree programmes has a statutory duty to monitor the quality of education and is therefore one of the most important advisory bodies in the quality assurance cycle. The Board comprises an equal representation of students and lecturers from a programme or cluster of programmes. Broadly speaking, the tasks and responsibilities of the Board of Studies are:

- to annually assess the implementation of the Teaching and Examination Regulations (OER) and advise on the OER to be adopted;
- to advise and support the director of the College or Graduate School on coordinating the programmes and policymaking within the College or Graduate School;
- to advise the programme director with a view to quality improvement. This covers aspects such as monitoring the quality of graduates and incoming students, and monitoring academic student counselling;
- to monitor the alignment between Bachelor's programmes and follow-on Master's programmes.

In addition, the Board of Studies may give solicited and unsolicited advice on all matters related to teaching. More detailed guidelines for the tasks, functioning and procedures of the Boards of Studies are included in the model UvA Standing Regulations for Boards of Studies.

## 4.2. Examinations Board

Like the Board of Studies, the Examinations Board has a statutory duty to monitor the quality of the degree programme. The Examinations Board has an assessment role in this regard; it tests the level of the programme against that of individual students and safeguards the quality of tests and exams.

In addition, the Examinations Board plays a key role in testing and assessment within a degree programme. The Board:

- is responsible for the final assessment as to whether a student has fulfilled the learning outcomes of the programme;
- ensures the quality of assessments and exams through (random) evaluations;
- appoints examiners to administer the tests and determine the results;
- is able to issue guidelines to examiners on testing a curriculum component;
- determines the rules and guidelines relating to the administering of tests and exams.

More detailed guidelines for the tasks, procedures and functioning of the Examinations Boards are included in the UvA Assessment Policy Framework dated December 2010.

## 4.3. Representative advisory bodies

Participation in decision-making is regulated at the faculty level through the Faculty Student Councils (FSRs) and the Faculty Works Councils (ORs). The Works Councils promote the interests of staff, while the Student Councils promote those of students. These Councils hold periodic consultations with the dean of the faculty about faculty policy and are therefore closely involved in designing the quality assurance for education. In addition, the Faculty Student Councils have a partial right of approval with respect to the establishment of the Teaching and Examination Regulations. For the components where no right of approval exists, the dean generally allocates advisory rights.

Participation in decision-making at the UvA takes place at a central level through the Central Works Council (COR) and the Central Student Council (CSR). Both bodies hold periodic consultations with the Executive Board regarding the University's strategic policy. Joint participation in decision-making for staff (COR) and students (CSR) takes place in the context of the Joint Meeting. The Joint Meeting has, among other things, the right of approval with regard to the UvA's *Strategic Plan* and the design of the quality assurance system.

#### **4.4. Advisory committees**

In addition to the formal representative advisory bodies, the UvA has two advisory committees that play a role in monitoring the quality of education: the Senate and the University Committee on Education (UCO). Both bodies consist of professors or associate professors representing the faculties and hold periodic consultations that are attended by the Rector Magnificus. The tasks, procedures and composition of the Senate are laid down in the Senate regulations.

##### **4.4.1. Senate**

The Senate can be seen as the academic conscience of the institution and is charged with providing solicited and unsolicited advice to the Executive Board on the most important aspects of UvA policy with respect to education and the pursuit of scholarship and the associated student and staff policies. The advice relates primarily to strategic and quality policy. The tasks, procedures and composition of the Senate are laid down in the Senate regulations.

##### **4.4.2. University Committee on Education (UCO)**

The University Committee on Education (UCO) is primarily responsible for providing solicited and unsolicited advice to the Executive Board regarding the education policy at the UvA, which includes at least:

- assessments of the quality of the programmes that transcend programme boundaries
- changes to the way the programmes are organised at the University
- annual faculty reports with respect to the quality of education

- UvA's policy proposals relating to matters of education
- assessing applications for new degree programmes
- the quality of non-degree teaching at the university.

The UCO also advises the Executive Board on the education policy of the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) and the Dutch Minister of Education, Culture and Science. The tasks, procedures and composition of the UCO are laid down in the UCO regulations.

#### **4.5. Involvement of alumni and the professional field**

All of the above bodies are internal councils and committees, advisory or otherwise. However, in an effective quality assurance system external parties are also involved in evaluating whether degree programmes meet the quality demanded by the relevant professional field. Quality assurance by alumni and the professional field is most effective when conducted close to home – in other words, close to the degree programme or the discipline itself. The professional field for a degree programme in a given discipline at a research university is therefore defined as the professional field that demands an academic level of thinking and performance in the field in which the student has graduated or in a directly related discipline. In consultation with the Board of Studies, the director of the College or Graduate School specifies more closely which areas or disciplines fall under the relevant professional field.

Alumni feedback on the degree programme is gathered by means of the biannual University Education Monitor (*WO-Monitor*). To link the professional field to the degree programmes, a model is selected for each programme or programme cluster that is most appropriate for the type of programme. This could entail either regular consultations with the relevant professional associations or umbrella organisations (e.g. in postgraduate degree programmes and degree programmes in medicine or dentistry) or by setting up an advisory council with representation from the professional field.

#### 4.6. **Supervisory Board**

Last but not least, the Supervisory Board plays a role in quality assurance at the institutional level. The Board oversees the management and policy of the university as a whole and the general procedures within the university. In addition to this oversight task, the Board plays an important role as a sounding board for and adviser to the Executive Board.

The Supervisory Board is charged, among other things, with:

- overseeing the design of the quality assurance system
- approving the *Strategic Plan*
- approving the budget, Annual Statement of Accounts and Annual Report
- approving the management and administration regulations
- appointing the members of the Executive Board.

The members of the Supervisory Board are appointed by the Dutch Minister of Education, Culture and Science for a maximum period of four years. The Supervisory Board is accountable to the Minister.

## 5. Monitoring the quality assurance system

In addition to the system and content of quality assurance, there is a third quality assurance element – monitoring the quality assurance system.

Monitoring occurs through the targeted assessment of a specific component of the quality assurance system and, contrary to what is set out above, is often more akin to a one-off assessment than to a PDCA cycle with a fairly logical completion time, such as an academic year. Monitoring the quality assurance system involves testing:

1. whether a component or actor is adhering to the quality assurance system, and/or
2. whether a component or actor is adhering to the set agreements.

On the basis of the findings, measures for improvement are drawn up where necessary. Further monitoring usually occurs as part of the regular quality cycles.

The clearest example of the monitoring of the quality assurance system is the accreditation of degree programmes and, since 1 January 2011, the assessments carried out by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) as part of an institutional quality assurance assessment, or institutional audit. In addition, assessments of whether a component or actor is adhering to a quality assurance system or to set agreements can be carried out by external parties, such as the Education Inspectorate, or they can be organised internally.

### 5.1. External controls: the accreditation system

The focus of an institutional audit is an evaluation of the quality assurance system itself. The audit tests how the institution's vision and policy arising from this vision are systematically and coherently implemented, evaluated and where necessary adjusted. The focus is not so much on assessing the achieved results, but on whether the institution is 'in control'. An institutional audit is carried out once every six years by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO). Although this audit does in a sense involve a six-year cycle, it is primarily a snapshot in which an assessment is made of whether an

institution has a robust system, including the ability to learn from its shortcomings, whereby it can guarantee the quality of its degree programmes.

### **Institutional audit on quality assurance**

An institutional audit on quality assurance is 'a certification mark that shows that the accreditation body has judged as positive the internal quality assurance of an institution for higher education, together with the institution's efforts to improve its results, inasmuch as these relate to the quality of its degree programmes'. *Source: [www.nvao.com](http://www.nvao.com)*

A degree programme accreditation involves not only an assessment of the programme quality achieved, but an assessment of the quality assurance system for that programme, both internally and in a national/international context. The assessment looks at how the programme guarantees that it is continuing to tie in with developments in the discipline at home and abroad, how these developments are translated into objectives and learning outcomes for the programme, and whether the teaching and learning environment is organised in such a way that students are able to achieve the learning outcomes.

The assessment by an NVAO audit panel can highlight points for improvement at both the institutional and degree programme level. Unlike some other institutions, the UvA has not yet opted for a system of midterm reviews when shortcomings are detected in a programme. The points for improvement need to be incorporated into the regular PDCA cycle of a degree programme and should therefore be reflected in the annual plan, and subsequently in the annual reports of the Colleges and Graduate Schools and of the faculty. However, if an annual report suggests a need to do so, the dean or the Executive Board can in certain situations decide to have a midterm assessment carried out by peers.

## **5.2. Internal controls: policy monitoring of specific aspects**

The *Strategic Plan* sets out the main objectives for the next four years with respect to teaching, research and organisation. Arising out of the *Strategic Plan*, UvA-wide policy frameworks (of which this paper on quality assurance is one) are drawn up. Although responsibility for implementation in accordance with

the Dutch Modernisation of University Governance Act (MUB)<sup>4</sup> rests with the faculty deans, a quality assurance system that centres on coherence between the various levels requires the monitoring of objectives set at the central level. The standards set out in the NVAO framework for institutional audits specifically mention coherence and monitoring as points for assessment, and these points are in fact assessed by means of so-called ‘audit trails’ during site visits to the institution.

Monitoring occurs regularly through the Periodic Executive Council meetings, in which the Executive Board discusses progress in the various UvA focus areas with the dean. To supplement this, the Executive Board (perhaps following consultations in the Executive Council) can where necessary take the initiative to organise an audit relating to institution-wide concerns. Examples of past audits are ‘UvA in the lift’ in 2003 (regarding service to students), student career advice in 2006 and more recently the ‘Quality Assurance Audit’ in autumn 2010 in preparation for the institutional audit.

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<sup>4</sup> For the Graduate Schools, this includes the teaching within the PhD programmes.

## 6. What quality assurance should safeguard

The system of quality assurance for education only leads to quality improvement if the improvement cycle is applied consistently and effectively to all aspects of education – degree programmes, staff and facilities. This section presents some guidelines in this regard.

The specific *quality criteria* that need to be complied with are only referred to here; they are detailed in the NVAO accreditation frameworks (known as ‘basic quality’) and in the UvA’s *Strategic Plan*, its *Vision on Teaching and Learning* and its policy frameworks.

### 6.1. Quality of the degree programme

The NVAO defines the basic quality of a degree programme as follows: ‘The quality of a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree programme in higher education that can reasonably be expected in international terms.’

Although brief, this definition implies a quality assurance system encapsulating the following:

- objectives and learning outcomes
- curriculum structure
- achieved level and study success
- quality of intake.

These four aspects are discussed in greater detail below. The programme director carries ultimate responsibility for drawing up a coherent and feasible curriculum that satisfies the quality criteria and characteristics as set out in the UvA’s *Vision on Teaching and Learning* and the requirements imposed on the degree programme by the accreditation.

### Three key questions in the assessment of a degree programme

The assessment of a degree programme involves finding answers to three questions:

1. What does the programme seek to do?
2. How does the programme achieve this?
3. Have the objectives been achieved?

#### 6.1.1. Objectives and learning outcomes

The objectives and learning outcomes of the degree programmes are contained in the Teaching and Examination Regulations. For programme quality, it is vital that these objectives tie in with international standards and with the requirements imposed by a follow-on programme or the professional field.<sup>5</sup>

Internationally, the learning outcomes for the Bachelor's and Master's programmes are set out in the Dublin Descriptors. The Descriptors are worded in very general terms, however, and need to be tailored to individual programmes. In addition, there need to be fairly regular assessments of whether the objectives and learning outcomes still tie in with international developments in the discipline and the professional field. International standards have been established for some disciplines.<sup>6</sup>

At a national level, objectives and learning outcomes are often established within disciplinary consultations. If this is not the case, the programme can determine whether the objectives and learning outcomes satisfy the set criteria by means of benchmarking against comparable degree programmes at home and abroad, or by comparing their own learning outcomes with those of several other disciplines. Periodic gauging of the objectives and learning outcomes in relation to the relevant professional field occurs at least once a year during meetings of the Advisory Council of a programme cluster (see Section 4.5).

<sup>5</sup> 'Professional field' also refers to practising researchers.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the Tuning Project

[http://www.tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu/index.php?option=com\\_frontpage&Itemid=1](http://www.tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1)

### 6.1.2. Curriculum

Each degree programme, at both the Bachelor's and Master's level, forms a coherent whole that enables students to achieve the stated learning outcomes. In determining curriculum content, the essential question is whether the courses in their entirety achieve the aims of the programme.

The programme implements a quality judgement at three levels:

- the quality of an individual course
- the quality of an academic year
- the quality of the programme as a whole.

It is necessary to establish, at each of these levels, whether the quality can be rated as 'good'. If the quality of all or some of these levels cannot be labelled 'good', measures for improvement need to be agreed on.

In all cases, the programme makes use of the UvA-wide 'question library' (*vragenbibliotheek*) when evaluating individual courses, and of the National Student Survey and the UvA-wide programme evaluation when evaluating the quality of the programme as a whole. The programme may also decide to opt for additional evaluation tools, such as panel discussions. A faculty's quality handbook sets out the kinds of evaluation and who is involved in initiating measures for improvement based on the evaluation results.

### 6.1.3. Level attained and study success rates

The ultimate 'proof' of the quality of a degree programme is the quality of its graduates and the fact that the programme is accredited. The key question here is whether a graduate is well-equipped to function in his or her follow-on degree programme, in a profession or in research.

Effective assessment and testing are vital for achieving the right level of student. The UvA has drawn up an Assessment Policy Framework containing 22 preconditions that a degree programme's assessment policy and the associated quality assurance must satisfy. A periodic evaluation of the final projects in the Bachelor's and Master's programmes forms part of this quality assurance. The quality of these final projects is externally assessed at least once every six years as part of the accreditation of the programme.

The University Education Monitor conducted biannually among graduates of the programme is a further information source for reflection on the exit level achieved. The Monitor canvases graduates about the job market situation and asks them to reflect on the content of the programme. In addition, some programmes conduct national surveys of employers, mainly via umbrella organisations.

Lastly, degree programme indicators such as pass rates, study success rates and cohort information about study progress are important elements in the quality assurance cycle. The principle behind the use of indicators is to ensure the level of the programme. For this reason, indicators only provide relevant information about the quality of the programmes if they are interpreted in conjunction with the results of the instruments and activities referred to above. The UvA arranges access to these indicators via UvAdata.

#### **6.1.4. Quality of intake**

A key factor in ensuring the quality of a degree programme is to ensure the quality of intake. Intake quality is determined by:

- establishing entry requirements and a meticulous intake procedure
- providing realistic information about the programme and about options after completing the programme.

The effectiveness of the intake procedure and the information provided is gauged by linking student study progress to data gathered during the intake procedure and the various information activities in which prospective students took part. It is also important to ascertain whether the students' expectations of the degree programme based on the information they received were met. For Master's programmes in particular, periodic evaluations must be conducted to find out whether the entry requirements are formulated with sufficient care.

## **6.2 Staff**

The hallmark of an academic degree programme is the link between teaching and research. The UvA adopts the principle that research-based teaching and learning should be the point of departure in all phases of a degree programme. This places the following demands on lecturers: they must be qualified to teach, be competent in terms of subject matter and demonstrate expertise with respect

to academic research. Accreditation must demonstrate not only that lecturers are of the desired quality, but also that there are enough lecturers to provide the teaching.

Proper implementation of the PDCA cycle calls for annual consultations (*jaar-gesprekken*) to be held (usually by the department chairs). These consultations play a key role in monitoring the quality of the lecturers: they entail both an assessment of the lecturer's performance in the past year (Check) and making result agreements for the coming year (Act and Plan). Career prospects are also addressed.

A second cycle runs concurrently with the planning of teaching. On the basis of the curriculum and its evaluation, each year it needs to be established which lecturer will devote how much of his or her time to which teaching duties, in accordance with the agreements made with the individual staff member in the context of his or her career development (see above). This includes both the agreements for teaching modules and other teaching-related matters such as providing information to students, participating in Boards of Studies and Examinations Boards, academic student counselling and course development.

### **6.3. Teaching facilities**

High-quality teaching is not possible without high-quality teaching facilities. The following principles are important with respect to material facilities (e.g. lecture theatres, audiovisual facilities) and immaterial facilities (e.g. academic student counselling, services provided by programme offices): effectiveness, student and lecturer-friendliness, cost efficiency and balanced development in line with educational developments in general. Quality assurance for teaching facilities falls under the direct responsibility of the Executive Board, and requires the joint efforts of the College and Graduate School directors, the deans and the directors of shared services. The College and Graduate School director is responsible, where necessary via the dean and at the behest of the programme director, for agreements with the various shared service units about the quantity and quality of the services or facilities to be provided. The directors of these services are in turn responsible for delivering the desired quality.

### **6.3.1. Academic student counselling**

The PDCA cycle is also applied at various levels with respect to student career advice. Academic student counselling operates at a general level (e.g. help with study planning, career advice, as well as support from student psychologists), but is also incorporated into individual courses and deployed in a targeted fashion in certain phases of the degree programme, such as during the first year or in the final phase. Monitoring academic student counselling and its effectiveness must therefore take place at these different levels. Evaluation occurs by means of the course and degree programme evaluations and the National Student Survey. By the same token, academic student counselling cannot be effective without a good student monitoring system.

### **6.3.2. Teaching support**

A key factor with regard to the quality of teaching and how this quality is perceived is the range of teaching support provided (e.g. timetabling, information provision, communications, student administration). This type of support is often provided by the Student Desks/programme offices.

Services are monitored through the National Student Survey and the UvA Employee Monitor. Where necessary, improvement measures can be established on the basis of the results. Depending on the results, action needs to be undertaken within a faculty, an institute or the shared service units. Complaints lodged by students are another source of information about services.

### **6.3.3. Material facilities**

Proper material facilities – teaching locations, study material, IT facilities and information material – are essential for delivery of the programmes.

Once again, many actors are involved in assuring the quality of these elements. This is because implementation issues are involved at both a high, central level (e.g. the availability of a digital learning environment) and at the course level (the lecturer can set up an effective Blackboard site for the course). Hence the

importance at all these levels of gathering information about the available facilities so that a targeted inventory can be made of any points for improvement.





## Quality Assurance Framework

Working on improving the quality of education is an ongoing focus at the University of Amsterdam (UvA). To ensure that improvement occurs systematically, the principles of a quality assurance system were laid down in the Internal Quality Assurance Framework in 1999. This Framework was modified in subsequent years following the introduction of the accreditation system in 2003 and various internal audits that looked at the application of the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle. Changes to the accreditation legislation as of 1 January 2011 and the establishment of a new *Strategic Plan* for the period 2011-2014 provided the immediate impetus for a further update of the quality policy and the quality assurance system.

This Framework again sets out the quality policy of the UvA. There have been no changes to the principles of the quality policy and the desired quality assurance system vis-à-vis the policy formulated in 1999, 2004 and 2006. However, the wording has been made more precise and has been modified on several points to reflect the new context.

### Credits

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