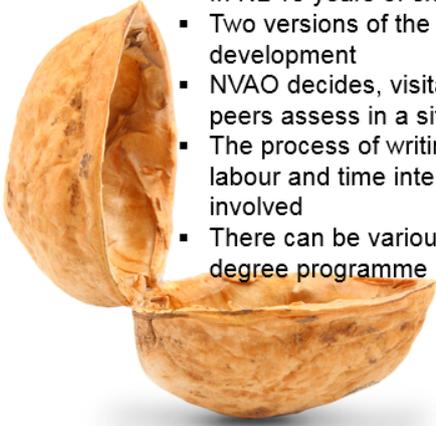


ACCREDITATION IN A NUT SHELL

Dr. Hans van den Berg, DipM - UT/CES/CELT, 20 August 2015



Accreditation in a nut shell

- Accreditation = certifying something that certifies
- In NL 10 years of experience, mandatory, crucial
- Two versions of the system, third one under development
- NVAO decides, visitation agency directs, external peers assess in a site visit
- The process of writing and being assessed is labour and time intensive; teachers may be involved
- There can be various special situations, like a new degree programme

INTRODUCTION

This note is about accreditation in Higher Education: what is it, why do we have it, how does it work, and the development of the Dutch accreditation system as it develops over the years. The target group: teachers and others who want to quickly get an overview. This note focuses on the UT.

WHAT IS ACCREDITATION?

Accreditation is a quality label for something which itself does certification.

Take a chemical analysis lab, as an example: the lab certifies an analysis sample – ‘in this sample we have found this and that chemical compounds’. That laboratory can, and sometimes must, be accredited. Accreditation of laboratories is done by the Council for Accreditation. This Council is an independent third party.

In the Dutch higher education, a degree programme ‘certifies’ its students: they obtain a diploma. Since 2005 the Netherlands and Flanders have an accreditation system. For the Dutch universities, this system succeeds the ‘visitation system’. The visitation system was run by the universities, through the VSNU. The Dutch government decided it was time to introduce an independent party: accreditation.

Set up on a legal basis, the independent governing body NVAO was charged with decision making on accreditations. This normally occurs every six years. Commissioned by a HE institution, a quality assurance agency ^{1,2} directs and reports an assessment make by a committee of external, independent peers. For this assessment, formal procedures, criteria and decision rules apply. There are two key steps:

- The institution presents the agency a self evaluation report ³, and a visit of the peer reviewers – the visitation committee – to the relevant degree programmes takes place. Developing the self evaluation report constitutes a significant effort, even though recently the maximum size was reduced to 15 pages, excluding mandatory appendices. As an indication: writing the self evaluation

¹ Other terms are also being used

² The UT has a large deal of experience with QANU, and NQA and Certiked in addition

³ Other terms are also being used, like self study and critical reflection

report may take somewhere between two and twelve months of calendar time. Mark Twain already said it: *"I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead."*

- The visit of the visitation committee takes about two full days. During the visit, the committee speaks with students, teachers, staff, representatives from the professional field, and management. In addition, the committee speaks with the degree programme's educational committee and the examination committee. Next, the visitation committee writes its draft report which, after a commentary step will be offered in its final version to the degree programme(s) or the institution. The institution must submit this final report to NVAO to apply for (re)accreditation.

Teachers may have a role in the process, as a contributor to the self evaluation report or by participating in a meeting with the visitation committee. As to the latter, this could be either as a member of a teacher panel, or an educational or examination committee panel.

Please note that not succeeding in acquiring or renewal of an accredited status leads to huge problems.

SPECIAL SITUATIONS IN ACCREDITATION

There are at least seven special situations in accreditation: extended or limited degree programme assessment; a 'distinctive feature'; a special aspect (for UT: TOM); double-accreditation; a new degree programme; a 'post-initial' degree programme; a Joint Degree.

Limited programme assessment (accreditation)

In the current shape of the accreditation system, also known as 'accreditation 2.0', an institution is offered the option to aim for the Institutional Audit. When an institution meets the requirements of this institutional audit, its degree programmes can undergo the limited programme assessment. If not, then the degree programmes must undergo the extended degree programme assessment. As the UT has passed the institutional audit, it can do limited programme assessments. The burden of evidence in a limited programme assessment is less than in an extended programme assessment, so, at least in theory, the work load is reduced.

Distinctive features

An example of a 'distinctive feature' is Internationalization. The assessment of distinctive features has separate criteria sets, in addition to the general accreditation criteria.

A special aspect

Although not being a direct requirement from NVAO, institutions provide focused, additional information about, for instance, a large-scale curriculum innovation. For UT, this is TOM.

Double-accreditation

Some degree programmes, from UT's Faculty of BMS, choose to opt for an international co-accreditation in addition to the mandatory NVAO accreditation. This leads to two sets of criteria, i.e. NVAO and for example EFMD⁴, preferably a joint external committee, and two accreditations.

'Post-initial'

'Post-initial' is a tricky concept, used only in the Netherlands (as far as your author knows). It stands for a degree programme typically taught in part-time to mid-career students. NVAO has a special criteria set for post-initial master's degree programmes.

Joint Degree

Two (or more) institutions can jointly offer a degree programme, with a single diploma. That's a *Joint Degree*. This is a complex situation, especially if one institution is Dutch, and the other(s) are not.

⁴ European Foundation of Management Development

New degree programme

In Dutch higher education a degree programme may only enroll students after it has met two conditions. The first is a positive judgement by the Committee on Effectiveness of Higher Education (CDHO). CDHO judges whether a new degree programme meets the requirements for macro-efficiency from a financial viewpoint, given the existing degree programmes on offer. The second is a positive judgement in the New Studies Test, by NVAO. The criteria are similar to those of a re-accreditation.

GOVERNMENT INSPECTORATE

UT is governed by the governmental Inspectorate of Education, part of the Ministry of Education.

ONTWIKKELING VAN HET ACCREDITATIESTELSEL

The Dutch accreditation system was launched in 2005: 'accreditation 1.0'. That version of the system only had the extended degree programme assessment.

Government decided on a change – 'accreditation 2.0' – mostly because it wanted to reduce the administrative burden for institutions. This led to the combination of an optional Institutional Audit in combination with limited programme. Accreditation 2.0 is the current version of the system. Dutch government, however, did respond with additional legislation to problems with high media visibility in two institutions of Applied Sciences (Dutch: HBO). As a result, assessment and testing have now taken a centre stage position both for NVAO and the Inspectorate.

Preparations for 'accreditation 3.0' were started by MoE in 2014. Cabinet Minister Jet Bussemaker has submitted her plans to Parliament (House of Commons) shortly before the summer recess of 2015. Much can be said about this, but there are many uncertainties as well, because the Minister's plans require a change in law on a precarious theme. The most prominent proposals and elements are:

1. The idea is, that a new option should be made available, next to the optional Institutional Audit: institutional accreditation without the need for degree programme accreditation, for selected institutions
2. The Minister wants to put high stakes into having the student in the centre, and the teacher having ownership of her/his education.
3. 'Quality culture' will have much more emphasis (it already was on the radar screen, but was operationalized as 'being in control'). was er al, maar werd geoperationaliseerd als 'in control zijn'). 'Quality culture' hasn't been defined by the Minister.
4. A better balance is sought between accountability and enhancement.

There is enthusiasm about 'accreditation 3.0', but there's also scepticism. See for a strong dosage of the latter a recent Dutch-language publication by Peter Kwikkers in ScienceGuide ⁵.

⁵ <http://www.scienceguide.nl/201506/borging-moet-echt-over-onderwijs-gaan.aspx>