

## 2021 European Quality Assurance Forum

### Building trust and enhancement: from information to evidence

Online event  
18-19 November 2021

### Call for contributions: Paper submission form

Deadline 26 July 2021

*Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.*

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#### Short bio (150 words max):

Martin Prchal is vice-principal at the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague. Trained as a musician of Czech origin in the US, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic and the UK, he holds teaching and performance diplomas (violoncello) and a MA degree in musicology. Following a career as a performing musician and various assignments in the fields of international relations and pre-college training at the conservatoires of Utrecht, Groningen and The Hague, he became the first Chief Executive of the European Association of Conservatoires (AEC) in 2001, a post he held until 2011. His current post at the Royal Conservatoire includes responsibilities for curriculum development and innovation, research, quality assurance and international relations. Martin has also served as the chair of the board of *MusiQuE* – Music Quality Enhancement, the international agency for evaluation and accreditation in the field of music, and is current vice-president of the European Chamber Music Academy (ECMA).

**Name:** Edwin Löring

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#### Short bio (150 words max):

As programme manager of several bachelor's degree programmes and an associate degree programme within the domains of IT and Digital Design at LOI University of Applied Sciences, Edwin Löring is experienced in designing and developing educational programmes for his LOI-students. The design and development of educational programmes requires insight into the IT & Digital Design industry, crafting a network of experts that inspire and create, and translating trends and developments into an educational programme that is fit for purpose. In addition, Edwin is responsible for revenues and formal accreditation of the educational programmes in the domains of IT and Digital Design. LOI UAS is a privately owned university of applied sciences that provides post-initial education by means of online

and/or blended learning. LOI UAS participates in the government-led pilot project 'Institutional Review' with the bachelor and associate degree programmes from the Digital Design domain.

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Anneke Vierhout has been working at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS) for almost 17 years, the last four years as team leader and policy advisor quality assurance in the department of Education and Research. Her team advises the board, lecturers and managers of the study programs on quality development. She develops, together with her team and colleagues in faculties, a quality culture in the AUAS, an institution with the utmost confidence in their employees and their professionalism. Anneke and her team challenge teams of the educational programs to determine their own objectives within the applicable legal and policy frameworks, and invite them to decide on how they will work towards making quality improvements and reflect on their progress with external peers, whom they have selected themselves. In light of this, participation in the pilot project on the institutional accreditation made sense!

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Martin de Wolf is currently director of a transition programme in the field of teacher education at Fontys University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands. Until recently, he was strategic quality consultant and project manager of the pilot project on institutional accreditation for Fontys. As a quality consultant, Martin focused mainly on quality culture and professional agency as fields of interest. From the perspective of quality enhancement, he developed an instrument to facilitate a future-oriented dialogue between stakeholders of an educational programme or faculty.

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Anouschka van Eijk-Heitlager is currently consultant quality management at Fontys University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands. She is project manager of the pilot project on institutional accreditation organised by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. She has research, teaching and strategic experience in the higher educational field for more than 15 years. Drs. Van Eijk-Heitlager received her scientific master degree in Psychology at Tilburg University. Her current areas of interest include quality culture in the field of education and practice-oriented research and narrative techniques to enhance professional agency of educational teams and quality enhancement of educational programmes.

***If there are several authors, please copy and fill in the fields for each author and indicate who is the corresponding author and who will be responsible for presenting the paper at the Forum.***

*IMPORTANT: If you are submitting a proposal, please do not register for the event online until the results of the selection process have been announced. Papers selected for EQAF 2021 will benefit from one reduced fee per contribution, which will be applied through a special registration process.*

## Proposal

**Title:** From quality assurance to a quality culture: four Dutch universities of applied sciences share their experiences with innovative approaches to programme review.

### **Abstract (150 words max):**

This paper describes the experiences by four Dutch universities of applied sciences in the context of a pilot project organised by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. This development suggests an important shift in the Dutch accreditation system from programme accreditation to institutional accreditation. The institutions have been experimenting in the last few years with new approaches to quality assurance at programme level as part of the pilot, which offers considerable freedom and scope for the review of individual programmes within the framework of a broad and robust quality audit at institutional level. Preliminary findings shows that these new approaches increase ownership and involvement of teachers and staff in quality processes, which has a positive impact on the development of a quality culture at both programme and institutional levels.

**Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere?** A much shorter version of this article has been published in Dutch by the online journal ScienceGuide (<https://www.scienceguide.nl/>)

**Indicate whether your contribution is based on practice, policy or research:** practice

**Text of paper (3000 words max):**

### **A bit of context: the political path to institutional accreditation in The Netherlands**

In 2018, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science launched a pilot project for the development of an 'Institutional accreditation with a lighter form of programme accreditation' (the so-called 'ILO experiment'). Currently, Dutch study programmes are accredited on a cyclical basis by the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation (NVAO). The purpose of this experiment was to test new external quality assurance approaches that would give institutions more flexibility to design their own method of reviewing their programmes taking into account the ESG, while giving the NVAO the responsibility to accredit the institutions as a whole. Four institutions in higher professional education are taking part: the University of the Arts The Hague, Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, LOI University of Applied Sciences and Fontys University of Applied Sciences. It is expected that a decision about this proposal on a new accreditation framework in The Netherlands will be made by the Dutch parliament during the academic year 2021-2022. In this paper, colleagues in the four participating institutions reflect on what the experiment could mean for the further evolution of the current quality assurance system into a system of institutional accreditation.

### **Strong quality culture**

Higher education is changing in every respect. First and foremost, the pace of the digitisation of teaching has accelerated, a process that has certainly been accelerated by the corona crisis. At the same time, universities of applied sciences are making huge advances in terms of flexible learning and collaboration with the professional community. All of these developments are occurring with careful consideration for the quality of education: are we doing the right things and are we doing them well? Today, this self-critical approach is well embedded in the quality thinking and acting of the institutions.

Fortunately, the accreditation system has also slowly but surely been changing. Programmes are being given more and more scope to decide for themselves how they wish to account for their

activities. The quality standards that the education must meet are also being prescribed in less detail. The mindset is also different now than it was twenty years ago. As we mentioned above, safeguarding, evaluating and demonstrating the quality of education comes naturally to the programme teams. In other words, the emerging quality culture in programmes calls for an approach with fewer protocols and less standardisation than the current system.

### Professional space

In light of these developments, the introduction of institutional accreditation is a logical next step for higher education in the Netherlands, since that makes educational institutions themselves responsible for the external quality assessment of individual programmes. The government's task will then be to assess whether the institutions are adequately safeguarding and accounting for the quality of their education. That will give institutions freedom to shape a quality environment that is appropriate for their own specific profile – depending, for example, on whether it is a large or a small institution or whether its programmes are funded or non-funded, but also the diversity of professional disciplines it covers. In the experiment we refer to this freedom as 'professional space', by which we mean a certain degree of autonomy in making choices designed to improve the quality of the education, while carefully considering the interests of the organisation and its stakeholders.

In the English-language literature, the term that comes closest to encompassing this is 'professional agency'. In 2014, the Finnish researcher Katja Vähäsantanen wrote: 'Professional agency refers to the notion that professionals such as teachers have the power to act, to affect matters, to make decisions and choices, and take stances (...)'. According to the researchers, professional agency is particularly important in change processes, when the professional space determines the degree to which professionals can influence their own work, the extent to which they are involved in the change, and how resilient the professional identity of those concerned is.

The **Fontys University of Applied Sciences** stimulates a quality culture that reflects trust, autonomy and a sense of ownership by educational teams in the process of quality enhancement. Educational professionals of Fontys have developed an approach for educational teams to draft their own quality framework. In this framework the relevant aspects from the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) regarding quality aspects are translated into programme specific quality objectives. The quality objectives, as defined by the programmes themselves, help peers to bring focus to the quality assessment. The framework is designed after intensive dialogue in the educational teams and with other internal (e.g. student groups) and external stakeholders of that specific programme. The work method that teams use in the process of designing the framework is diverse and according to their own preferences. One team, for example, started with a blank sheet on which they formulate their own quality ambitions and objectives. Then these criteria are fitted into the ESG-framework. Another team works from an inductive approach, starting with consecutive future-oriented peer reviews and followed by identifying the corresponding quality objectives that should be included in their quality frame. All programmes participating in the experiment collect relevant quality information according to their quality framework. The quality framework and the programme specific quality information guides peer review in which the quality of the program is assessed. Educational teams working with a quality framework observe positive effects on their quality culture. Lecturers experience the quality framework as an instrument that is 'their own' and simultaneously directs quality assessment in peer reviews. Professionals also emphasize the value of the quality framework in evaluating study programmes, by making quality characteristics more explicit. The quality framework invites internal and external peers to discuss quality indicators. These dialogues increase the common understanding of the intended quality of the programme. From our point of view, working with a visual quality framework contributes to a shared responsibility, strengthens professional agency on quality and

contributes to a strongly future- and improvement-oriented mindset of educational teams imbedded in the daily workflow. These findings can be seen as important characteristics of quality culture in the educational field.

### **Evaluation as learning**

The ILO experiment has a positive impact on the professional agency of programmes because there is room for choice. From the outset, the professional scope in the experiment has taken the form of allowing programme teams to determine the perspective from which they wish to review the programme. In contrast to the traditional approach with fixed accreditation standards, the teams now address fundamental questions such as: What level of quality are we striving for? What criteria will be used to demonstrate that level of quality? And how will we reach that level of quality? The answers to those questions are validated on the basis of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG).

Peer review, which plays an important role in the experiment, also contributes to the perception of professional agency. External, independent experts assess the quality of the programmes and advise on how the programmes can improve further. Here too, programmes have the scope to arrange this process as they see fit. The teachers concerned regard this instrument as a form of evaluation, which we could also call 'evaluation as learning' (Bovill, 2011). It calls on the quality consciousness of the programme teams by explicitly requiring them to consider the desired quality of education and to be open to encounters with external experts during the educational process. This promotes meaningful discussion and provides insights that stimulates further improvement in the quality of education.

The **Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS)** has seized the opportunity to experiment with strengthening the sense of ownership of study programmes. This experiment provides the possibility to test a new method to assess and review programmes for accreditation purposes. The AUAS intends to increase the ownership of study programmes by letting them decide on the approach to the accreditations of these programmes, e.g. by allowing them to consciously choose which working method, form and peers suit them best, allowing them to decide on timing and comparability, and on reflection and reporting. As a result, each programme selects, within a set framework agreed upon, its own form for the peer review. One of the study programmes, for example, decided to have about twenty alumni follow the current education programme for one day. After doing so, the alumni collectively provided feedback. Other programmes prefer an approach focusing on development and exchange views with peers, students and lecturers. In addition to these options, there are programmes which prefer an approach as effective as possible. The method developed by the AUAS works well because the programme can choose an approach which matches their own culture, as a result of which ownership and involvement are strengthened and peer review offers a positive experience.

### **Involvement of stakeholders**

The development outlined above illustrates the evolution in thinking about quality from 'quality assurance' to 'a quality culture'. The trend towards institutional accreditation clearly reflects that. What do we mean by a quality culture? In answer to that question, in 2006 the European University Association (EUA) wrote: 'Quality culture refers to an organisational culture that intends to enhance quality permanently and it is characterised by two distinct elements: on the one hand the cultural/psychological element of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality and, on the other hand, a structural/managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating individual efforts'. In other words, it is important that the institution has shared values and that the various stakeholders within the institution are involved. The ILO

experiment has shown that institutional accreditation leads to a greater commitment to the quality culture.

**The Royal Conservatoire of the University of the Arts The Hague** is actively experimenting with forms of a quality culture designed to secure the close involvement of students and teachers. An important guiding principle is to bring about a shift from a process-driven approach to quality assurance (based on the language of quality assurance) to a discussion of the quality of the content of the education (based on the language of the discipline). To this end, the Conservatoire has established a system of international 'critical friends', who play an important role in the permanent improvement of programmes. The 'critical friends' are renowned experts in the relevant discipline who spend several days reviewing the standard of a programme or a department (jazz, early music or composition, for example) and discussing it with students, teachers and management. The experts speak the same language as the students and teachers, but simultaneously assess a programme on the basis of a number of criteria. The review concludes with a report with substantive observations and recommendations, to which the programme or department has to write a reaction and a plan for improvements. The 'critical friend' returns three years later to investigate what has been done in response to the recommendations. In order to maintain a high level of objectivity, the 'critical friends' are appointed by MusiQuE, an external international EQAR- registered organisation for accreditation and review in the field of higher music education. The process is monitored by a visitation panel, which visits the institution every six years and evaluates the process in general on the basis of the reports of the 'critical friends' and in line with the ESG. The experiences with this method have demonstrated a significant increase in the engagement of students and teachers with the issue of quality. As a result, they feel the workload is lighter than with the current programme assessments, which are often seen as a 'necessary evil'. Most importantly, however, this method has greatly increased the relevance of external quality assessment, because the far deeper examination of the programme or department means the recommendations for improvements are far more relevant than with the existing programme accreditations.

### **Appropriate safeguards**

This procedure with external stakeholders creates a learning environment built on development, transparency and self-reflection through a dialogue on specific issues. It gives institutions the chance to increase the relevance and impact of the programme's assessment process. That process is no longer perceived as a technocratic procedure that is imposed from outside, but rather as an assessment of the programme's 'own' quality objectives and development issues. Furthermore, the entire procedure is carried out by national and international peers who (more often than at present) have expertise in areas with added value for the programme. The judgements and advice of the peers address the issues facing the programme and its ambitions more directly.

This all means that the programme seeks robust feedback that will help it to progress further. The result is a suitable instrument of quality assurance for the programme. A safeguard that the programme regards as a relevant and even a logical activity. The appropriate method of quality assurance promotes the willingness to improve the programme and the institution as a whole.

**LOI University of Applied Sciences** participates in the institutional accreditation experiment as a representative of privately owned education, as an institution that values quality, and as an institution that is keen to contribute to a more effective and efficient accreditation system in The Netherlands. LOI UAS experienced that accreditations often had the same starting point: panels generally knew little about distance or blended learning and the mechanics behind it. This meant that visitations focused mainly on process aspects and less on issues concerning content and level of the actual

programme. LOI UAS therefore used the experiment as a lever in developing 'The Student Experience' which is based on the concept 'Mind the Gap – getting near the distance student'. The approach of 'The Student Experience' is to let the assessing peers experience LOI UAS education, in order to create a stronger focus on the content of the programmes. 'The Student Experience' consists of following a module within the digital learning environment and designing the visitation day in accordance with didactic principles - in order to generate more interactivity and openness. During the execution of the site visit it showed that 'The Student Experience' contributed to shifting the point of departure of the site visit. In general, there was a better understanding of the operational mechanics of LOI UAS and the set-up of the site visit provided an interesting, fun and an educational experience that fit the contents of the programmes. This experience resulted in more ownership of the educational management and community, and a lot of positive energy. In addition, it has inspired other educational managers at LOI UAS to challenge their own ideas and assumptions with regards to the approach towards an accreditation process.

### **(Self-)confidence**

This form of quality assurance at programme level is naturally, and correctly, combined with safeguards at the institutional level in the form of an institutional audit based on national criteria. This audit must be both robust and appropriate to the institution. Is the institution's system of quality assurance in order? Does it have a quality culture that enjoys broad support? How is that culture reflected in the system of quality assurance employed by the programmes? Is there a dialogue between the institution and the programmes and the professional community? How can the students 'demand' their right to quality when they feel it is sub-standard? These questions have to be addressed in the institutional audit, the purpose of which is to guarantee ownership of the institution's quality culture and a quality-driven approach within the institution. That creates confidence and self-confidence. Public confidence in the quality of education. Confidence among professionals in the manner in which quality is guaranteed. And self-confidence among institutions and programmes in their ability to demonstrate to external parties that they can properly monitor and improve the quality of their education.

### **References:**

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Bovill, C. (2011): Sharing responsibility for learning through formative evaluation: moving to evaluation as learning. *Practice and Evidence of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 6 (2). pp. 96-109.

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Prchal, M & Ravenhorst, J (2018): *Making the move from Quality Assurance to Quality Culture concrete: an example from the field of music*. European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF). Vienna.

*Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 26 July 2021 to [eqaf@eua.eu](mailto:eqaf@eua.eu). The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith\_Jones.doc. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.*