

FOSTERING QUALITY AT THE KATHOLIEKE UNIVERSITEIT LEUVEN**BELGIUM****Fred Bellefroid and Jan Elen****1. INTRODUCTION**

Comparative studies in higher education are playing an ever more important role in the growing internationalisation of this sector. These comparative studies relate to all aspects of higher education, on the institutional as well as on the system level, and are considered to be of great value in policy-making. It is striking though that, whenever a comparative analysis is found in literature, on whatever subject matter related to higher education in general or university education more specifically, the Belgian case has always been absent, as though higher education were inexistent in this country. We are not going to enumerate the manifold reasons for this situation, for we hope that the Flemish case will in the future be part of some comparative analyses. Participation in this project was esteemed to be a good start.

Although the focus of this case study is on quality management of education at the K.U. Leuven, the report also gives a broad insight into Flemish higher and university education.

The first part deals with policy options of the Flemish government towards higher education in general since the federalisation of the national state and towards quality management in universities more specifically, taking into account the general characteristics of university education in Flanders. This is the context for a short qualitative and quantitative picture of the K.U. Leuven and for an overview of recent initiatives geared towards strengthening the strategic basis for the institution as well as strengthening the basis for quality improvement.

The second part deals with the principles, mechanisms and instruments used in the internal quality assessment system of the K.U. Leuven. It also considers a number of specific quality improvement projects and gives an appraisal of the effects of this internal quality management system.

In the third and final part, a reflection on different aspects of this quality management system is offered.

2. CONTEXT

2.1. International

International trends in higher education indicate that not only all West European countries are involved in a global movement towards quality assessment and quality improvement, but that it gradually affects the non-western part of Europe and the countries of other parts of the world as well.

The fundamental trend underlying this international movement is the changing relationship between higher education and government in the different national states. This trend is induced by the financial consequences of the growing massification and diversification of higher education and by the growing importance of the benefits of higher education for stimulating economic growth (the spin-offs of knowledge). Harker (1995) relates it to postmodernism and the decreased credibility of rationalism.

Deregulation, autonomy, quality assurance, accountability, innovation, strategic management, etc., become the central themes in the discussions between government and higher education.

This is also the case in Flanders, which entered the slipstream of the international movement (fever) towards an institutionalised effort for quality in the mid-eighties, in higher education as well as in other sectors of public life. Systematic care for quality on all levels of higher education means more autonomy in pursuing its intrinsic (“the unfettered search for truth and the disinterested pursuit of knowledge”) as well as extrinsic (“the capacities of higher education institutions to respond to the changing needs of the societies of which they are part”) qualities (Van Vught, 1994).

2.2. National

The international trend in higher education has been paralleled by the creation of a federal state in Belgium, with autonomous Regions and Communities. The locus of decision-making for all so-called cultural and person-related matters, including education, are the Flemish and the French Communities.

2.2.1. *General issues related to the federalisation process*

Legislative reform

The existing rules for universities dated from 1971 and were completely unadapted to the new trends. Moreover, they still carried along the stigmata of the former “Belgian” compromising under the so-called *quatre-quart* rule: policy action with regard to education is possible only on condition that two delicate balances are maintained, involving language (balance between the French-speaking and the Dutch-speaking parts or communities of Belgium) and, within each community, ideology (catholic versus “neutral”). This usually lead to “the non-politics of university education” (Molitor, 1983).

Numerous incremental adaptations added to the growing incoherence in higher education legislation, leading to uncertainty for the institutions and even arbitrariness in decision-making on the governmental level, making this legislation totally unadapted and unfit for coaching Flemish higher education into the 21st century.

Except a few minor aspects, education has become the full responsibility of the Communities from the beginning of 1989 on. The Flemish minister of education soon embarked upon establishing a new legislation for both sectors of higher education. This was finished in 1991 for the university sector and in 1994 for the non university higher education sector. Although three years separate these legislative reforms, it was stressed from the start that both decrees should build on the same basic principles. It is evident however that the dual structure of higher education was reaffirmed, but at the same time more clearly defined. The remainder of this paper, unless said otherwise, only addresses the university sector.

Changing relations between government and higher education

Along with adapting the legislation to the new trend, a structural reform was initiated, aiming at less administration and more policy on the level of the ministerial department. The new legislation acted also as a vehicle for a growing dialogue between both parties involved (via the VLIR -- the Flemish Interuniversity Council, composed of the Rectors). This is clearly reflected in the numerous mutual discussions during the preparation of the 1991 decree on university education.

Influence of Science and Technology Policy

At the same time, a great part of the financial as well as the structural responsibility for Science and Technology Policy was given to the Communities. Together with the firm intention of the Flemish Minister-President (who is now responsible for S and T Policy) to raise the budget for fundamental research, this process has been of great benefit to the Flemish universities. Public funds for fundamental research are almost completely allocated to universities, be it on a strong competitive, quality-oriented basis.

2.2.2. Policy options for Flemish higher education in the future

General higher education policy options

The legislative reform, initiated in 1989, is based on a number of fundamental options for higher education in Flanders, laid down in the policy document on which the new decree was built:

Deregulation and autonomy

In order to reduce the tension between bureaucracy and professionalisation, Flemish higher education institutions benefit from a relative broad autonomy in financial and staffing matters. As far as academic programmes are concerned, each institution should stick to its mission and to the mandate as laid down in the decree, in order to prevent wildgrowth and its financial consequences. Freedom and autonomy exist within this mandate. Expansion of an institution's teaching mandate can only be achieved by decree (the programming norm), following approval by the Flemish Interuniversity Council.

For the non-university sector, this autonomy and deregulation almost constitute a revolution: for the first time they have their own financial envelope with which they can develop adapted policies (personnel, library, teaching equipment, infrastructure, etc.)

Unity in diversity

From the outset it was stated that the same basic principles should be applied to both sectors of higher education and that legislation for both should be harmonised. But at the same time, a clear distinction was maintained between the universities and the non-university higher education sector (hogescholen), thus consecrating the dual structure in the new legislation.

This is operationalised in the definition of the mission and tasks of each sector, having the advantage of reducing the confusion existing before and also of reducing the tension created by two related phenomena, academic drift and vocationalisation.¹

Rationalisation and programming

This is an essential element in the prevention of wildgrowth in programme-supply by higher education institutions and in reducing the financial consequences thereof. A more pro-active oriented objective is to stimulate co-operation between institutions within and between sectors.

Instruments are provided by the law, but since the response of higher education institutions to these stimuli has not been as expected by the government, a special commissioner is appointed by the government who has to come up with specific measures based on concentration and co-operation.

Scale-enlargement of the non-university higher education sector.

This fits into envelope-financing, into better management and adapted structures for strategic actions and should make these higher education institutions more competitive and more efficient in the use of public finances. The number of non university higher education institutions is reduced from 163 to 31.

Quality management in education

Although government admits that quality management was inherently present in higher education, a formalised and unified external quality management system based on peer review was felt to be unavoidable in the context of international trends.

A broad picture of higher education characteristics

Binary structure

As stated above, the binary structure of higher education in Flanders is affirmed in the new legislation. Nevertheless we can observe the intention to “integrate” both sectors, while at the same time maintaining their individuality. This is reflected in the distinct mission for universities and for

1. Higher education in Flanders in fact has a three-level structure, because in the non-university higher education sector distinction is made between short-cycle (or one cycle) and long-cycle (or two-cycle) higher education.

“Hogescholen” provided by the decree, based roughly on the distinction between academic and professional education and on research capacity and reputation.

Structure and organisation of university education

University education is organised around 18 disciplinary groups which are enumerated in the decree. Within each group, different levels of education can be distinguished:

- Academic education, leading to a basic university degree. This level is subdivided into two cycles: the first cycle usually takes two years and exceptionally three years, the second cycle takes two, three or four years depending on the discipline.
- Advanced education distinguishes between complementary studies, specialisation studies and teacher training programmes.
- Doctoral training leads to a doctorate (Ph.D.).
- Post-academic training contains all activities oriented towards permanent education, lifelong learning, continuing education.

University education is still organised on a yearly basis: every programme provides for minimum 1 500 and maximum 1 800 hours of contact, seminars, practical sessions per year. Transition from one year to the other requires successful completion of examinations on all subjects taught during that year. Examinations take place at the end of the academic year (May-June). A second examination period is provided during summer holidays for students who did not succeed in the first period.

Access

Access to university education (and to higher education in general) is open to every person who obtained a degree of secondary education. Independent of subject choice and of results obtained, holders of a degree of secondary education can enter the discipline of their choice. Every individual candidate has also free choice of the university he wants to enrol in.

Until now, the university sector only knew one exception to the rule of absolute open entry: admission to the civil engineering programme requires passing an entrance examination.

Changes are inevitable. Substantive pressure from several sides has led to the decision to limit the number of medical doctors in both Communities from 2004 on. Taking into account that it takes seven years to graduate as a medical doctor, this means a reduction of the number of freshmen from 1997 on. It is yet to be decided how this will be effected.

Following the “inefficiency” of the system in general, due to almost unlimited access and consequent massification, we witness growing pressure towards a more generalised selective access, aiming at eliminating the 10-15 per cent group of freshmen with restricted chances of success.

All this of course is not without consequences for quality management in and for financing of universities (input funding partially based on students).

Autonomy

We are aware that the concept of autonomy in itself is relative, depending in reality on perception and on subjective appreciations. Moreover, autonomy can only be partial.

Taken these limitations into account, Flemish universities are given a fairly high degree of autonomy in matters related to financial policies and to staffing policies.

Basic subsidies for universities are not ceiled and are allocated to each institution as an envelope. One half of this envelope is historically determined and fixed, the other half is based on the number of students, expressed in teaching load units. This allocation system in short is partially input-based, leaving some room for competition between institutions, uses a very simple formula in which specific governmental objectives are absent, and leads to an institutional block grant.

Internal allocation of this envelope is free, as far as staffing costs do not exceed 80 per cent of the budget. Within this budgetary constraint, universities decide for themselves on the composition of their staff and on the criteria for recruiting them. Some minor indications are given on the relative share of temporary and tenured staff.

As far as programming is concerned, a number of limitations are provided by the decree, inspired by the effects of unlimited expansion of programmes on finances and by the reluctance of institutions to co-operate. (cf. supra Rationalisation and Programmation).

For each separate institution the decree stipulates the disciplines for which it can organise teaching on the basic academic programme level. Expansion of an institution's teaching mandate can only be achieved by decree (the programmation norm), following approval by the Flemish Interuniversity Council.

Additionally, the minister has provided for the rationalisation norm, intended to stimulate co-operation between universities for disciplines with few students.

Within the actual teaching mandate, each institution is autonomous in determining the number and type of courses and the contents of programme and courses, the teaching methods, etc., provided that the yearly study load is situated between 1 500 and 1 800 hours. These aspects used to be dealt with in detail in the legislation prior to the actual decree.

Policy options for quality management

Objectives

The basic goals of quality management from a governmental point of view are fostering accountability/cost-efficiency and innovation as basic values in both sectors of Flemish higher education, to be realised through permanent assessment of the educational process. Better education with less or the same amount of public finances. The number of paragraphs devoted to quality management in the legislation is very limited, indicating that the government only wants to steer from a distance.

Basic principles

Higher education institutions themselves are responsible for regular internal and external quality assessment and for the follow-up of these evaluations. Government can organise meta-evaluations and comparative research on the quality of education through a committee of independent experts, the results of which are public. If after repeated negative evaluations a programme does not meet the standards, government can stop financing this programme until it does. The probability of governmental use of these meta-evaluations in the near future is considered to be very low.

The universities, organised in the VLIR, started participating in the Dutch 'External quality assessment system'. In 1991, an external assessment of 'Geology' was organised co-operatively. This experiment resulted in 1992 for the first time in two agreements for co-operation between the Dutch VSNU and the VLIR:

- a general agreement for organising common external quality assessments for specific programmes, to be carried out by the same visiting committee for both countries;
- a specific agreement for organising external quality assessments for the same programme at the same time but with different visiting committees; through this agreement the VLIR can rely on the support from the VSNU in organising the external assessments.

It should be stressed that both agreements assume the same basic procedure of quality assessment.

Experiences with this system of quality assessment resulted in 1994 in fulfilment of the VLIR-task "to council the Flemish government on the procedure and modalities of assessment of the quality of university activities, of parts of the university and of its staff members".

This recommendation reflects the characteristics of the Dutch model and is constituted of three components:

- The (permanent) internal quality assessment is the cornerstone of the whole system and is built up autonomously by each institution in a comprehensive way. This means that quite some variation can exist in methods, procedures and instruments used in the different internal quality assessment systems -- these can partly be discerned in the selfstudy reports.
- The external quality assessment is organised on an interuniversity basis and should be complementary to the internal system.
- Universities can participate in international quality assessment initiatives. In certain cases these can replace the external component of quality assessment.

(For the basic elements of the internal and the external components, see Annex 1)

2.3. The Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (K.U. Leuven)

In the previous sections we referred to changes which have and still are taking place on the national as well as on the international level. These of course also constitute the environment in which the K.U. Leuven developed. The main question in this section will consequently be how these changes affected the K.U. Leuven and how this institution reacted to or assimilated trends evolving in the broader context.

Before we go into that question, first a short introduction to the institution itself.

2.3.1. Some basic characteristics of the K.U. Leuven

Nature of the institution

The K.U. Leuven was founded in 1425, making it the first university of the Low Countries. By now it is the oldest catholic university still existent.

A turning point in the more recent history was the splitting of the bilingual university into two unilingual universities in 1968. As a consequence, the French-speaking “Université Catholique de Louvain” moved to the French-speaking part of Belgium.

Although it is a catholic and so-called “free” university, it is subsidised in the same way as all other universities and submitted to the same legal prescriptions. Moreover, although the catholic church has a representative in the Board of Governors (with only an ‘observing’ function, no voting-power) and a yearly report is submitted to the bishops, the institution is autonomous in all academic and management matters and is financially totally independent from the church.

Characteristic is also the growing independence from direct state subsidies, as measured against the increase of income due to competitive research capacities. Although state direct subsidies represent by now only 53 per cent of the total income, they nevertheless provide the necessary basis for the teaching function.

Some figures

Together with a small campus in another part of Flanders (Kortrijk), the K.U. Leuven is responsible for 27 000 students, almost all of which are full-time. This number represents 40 per cent of all students in Flemish universities, making it the largest in Flanders (and also in Belgium). The yearly intake of freshmen amounts to approximately 5 200, recruited from all regions of the Flemish community and a minority from other countries. Yearly, approximately 3 600 diplomas of a basic academic degree are awarded; they represent 60 per cent of the total output in number of diplomas.

The three basic university functions are carried out by approximately 6 300 staff members: 55 per cent belong to the academic staff and 45 per cent to the administrative and technical staff. Another 6 900 people perform the necessary activities in the five academic hospitals.

The total budget of the university (hospitals not included) amounts to BF 13.5 billion, of which as indicated above, 53 per cent represents the basic governmental subsidy.

Faculties and departments

Except for veterinary sciences, students at the K.U. Leuven are taught in all disciplines enumerated in the decree. These 17 disciplines are clustered into 13 faculties. Faculties are responsible for all aspects of the educational process, including quality management. They are subdivided into departments, the number of which varies with the faculty. Departments were set up in the mid-sixties to provide for a more solid structure for research and to stimulate co-operation and interdisciplinarity. As a result, the research capacity was strengthened significantly.

Both faculties and departments have a democratically constituted council, of which the Faculty Council of course is the most important. It is presided by an elected dean (3 years), who represents the faculty in the Academic Council.

Decision-making structure

One of the main features of the decision-making structure, apart from the democratic character and representation, is the overall presence and dominance of (tenured) academics in all decision-making bodies, which makes the K.U. Leuven a “professor-run” university.

Except the Board of Governors (BG), half of its members being representatives from “influential” sectors of society, all other important individual leaders as well as decision-making bodies are or are constituted of professors. This holds true for elected as well as for appointed individuals or members of committees/bodies.

Academic policy is the responsibility of the Academic Council (AC), in which all faculties are represented by their dean; students and staff are represented as well. Other members of this AC of course are the rector (who presides the AC); the general manager; three vice-rectors (humanities, exact sciences, biomedical sciences); three members who are responsible for co-ordination of respectively educational policies, research policies, and student affairs, and finally the rector of the campus in Kortrijk. These nine members constitute the Executive Committee (EC), in which decisions to be taken by the AC and the BG are prepared. By its constitution, it is de facto the most influential body of the university, of course with respect for the democratic rules.

Faculties and departments also have a council, in which next to all tenured members also some representatives of non-tenured staff and of students participate. (see figure in annex 2)

In addition to these “official” decision-making bodies, a number of other more or less subject-related advisory councils and committees exist, which play an important role in defining policy-directions, in preparing decisions to be taken and in providing for the necessary logistic and other support. To name a few: the Research Council, the Educational Council, the Council for Continuing Education, the Council for International Relations, the Council for Student Services, etc.

It is relevant in this context to focus a little more on two important councils, the Research Council and the Educational Council, and to indicate some possible reasons for differences in effectiveness of both councils.

It is clear that the Research Council, set up in 1978 in all universities following legal instructions, has gained a high degree of credibility at the K.U. Leuven. This is reflected in the fact that, although it

only has an advisory role, its propositions are generally approved by the Academic Council. Credibility of course grows with results and these are mainly due to:

- strong leadership and a council composed of members selected on the basis of their research qualities;
- clear objectives for building on research quality and use of strict criteria in evaluating and resourcing research proposals in accordance with these objectives, without compromising;
- strong administrative support: guidance in project formulation, widespread dissemination of all relevant information on research funding, grants, scholarships, remediation for non-rewarded projects, etc.

Of course we have to add to this the fact that money is available on a competitive basis and that research standing improves institutional and personal status and reputation and related income.

Compared to the Research Council, the impact on real decision-making is far less for the Educational Council. Excellence in teaching is not as visible as excellence in research, which makes the composition of this council less straightforward. So are the general objectives of university education, which sound well on paper, but seem to be quite different in reality. We have to add to this that much lip-service is being paid to activities related to education. In this context and taking into account that no incentive funding is provided, the Educational Council acts as a laboratory of new ideas without having the resources or the power to implement them. Making this instrument as effective as the research counterpart is a major challenge for the K.U. Leuven in the future.

Trends in recent policy-making

In an article on the recent history of the K.U. Leuven (Lamberts, 1993), the author states that the major trends during the last ten years were:

- great concern about the quality of education;
- marked expansion of (application oriented) research; and
- growing internationalisation.

These of course reflect the general trends in higher education in West-Europe and beyond. Except for the first trend, which is the central theme of this paper, we are not going into a detailed description of these general trends. We only want to stress here that, more than in the past, these directions resulted from deliberate policy options and priorities which were supported by adapted structures for decision-making and implementation of decisions, and which were subject to evaluation and follow-up.

For this reason, we would like to add to these: mainly academic-oriented; trends another general trend towards improved; strategic; management in support of a generalised concern; or management; for quality.

2.3.2. Strengthening the basis for quality improvement

Under this heading, we want to elaborate on a selected number of initiatives which were taken to enhance the strategic management capacity of the institution as a whole and of its constituent parts, illustrating at the same time the way in which the K.U. Leuven reacted to the changing internal as well as external environment, indicating also its capacity for innovation and for quality improvement.

The Strategic Committee

From 1985 on, the year when a new rector was elected, the K.U. Leuven decision-making bodies witnessed a growing need for ongoing reflection on existing and future challenges. This resulted in setting up a Strategic Committee in 1989, presided by a top manager from a multinational and composed of a selected number of academic members next to the members of the Executive Committee.

The first task the president set for this Committee was to define and explicitly state the identity of the K.U. Leuven, its mission statement (see brochure). The basic elements of this mission statement are:

- the K.U. Leuven is an autonomous scientific institution in which fundamental (basic) research and transfer of knowledge are essential and complementary (a university in the traditional sense of the word);
- a Flemish university / a university of and for the Flemish people;
- an internationally oriented university;
- a university of catholic persuasion.

It is clear that this mission statement, even in its general and very broad terms, gives a sense of direction to the institution and facilitates coherence in decisions. One of the first general outcomes is that, more than before, emphasis is put on the teaching mission, service to society and the international orientation of the institution.

The loss of the president from the Strategic Committee was the start of its silent death, speeded up also by another discussion which was initiated by this Committee but finished without it. This was the discussion on structural reform.

Structural reform

Deregulation, autonomy, decentralisation, effectiveness, efficiency, competition, multiplication of tasks, etc., all pointed towards the need for better management and for adapted structures. Negotiations between a limited team of external organisational experts and a selection of members from the Strategic Committee, resulted in the proposition to make the K.U. Leuven a more business-oriented organisation in which “resource units” are the key elements. This approach met serious resistance from those who wanted to adhere to the old concept of “universitas”, the university as an autonomous and democratic community of students, assistants and professors. The whole discussion finally led to a compromise in which the existing democratic structures were reaffirmed and the decentralisation of responsibilities to faculties and departments was strengthened. This

decentralisation should pave the way for careful and systematic reflection on the future of the faculty and of its constituent parts, including management for quality. The next three elements are supposed to play an important part in this decentralisation process.

The internal allocation system.

Parallel with the structural adaptation and with the introduction of the new funding mechanism for universities as laid down in the new decree, an adapted system for the internal allocation of finances was set up. This system only applies to the internal allocation of the basic state subsidy of the institution, which for 80 per cent covers salaries and another 20 per cent operating costs, and which mainly serves the teaching function.

The basic characteristics of the system are:

- 70 per cent of this basic governmental subsidy is allocated to the faculties, to be used for salaries and operating expenses. The remaining 30 per cent is central budget, covering salaries of administrative staff and costs of common services on the one hand and a limited discretionary -- strategic -- budget for the Executive Committee on the other hand.
- The budget for each faculty is determined by teaching-related criteria (75 per cent) and research-related criteria (25 per cent), which mainly point towards an input-oriented allocation model.
- The budget allocation does not provide incentives for improvement of teaching function:
 - the discretionary budget of the Executive Committee does not include a special purpose budget for educational activities, only some incremental financing of education-related matters;
 - the Educational Council does not dispose of a budget for innovative actions;
 - faculty budgets mainly cover staff costs and leave little or no room for specific teaching-oriented initiatives.
- Faculties have a high degree of freedom in spending their share of the basic subsidy, which in practice means flexibility in their staffing policies (composition in terms of rank, full-time/part-time, tenured/non tenured, promotion policies, etc.).

Several faculties have set up or are setting up their own system for allocating the faculty budget to the departments. Although they reflect the basic features of the institutional model, they show great diversity in the importance of the different parameters. In general we observe a growing attention for qualitative aspects of academic life. Moreover, these differences reflect the preferences, the priorities and the opportunities of each faculty; quality is only one of these, though an important one.

Faculty planning

A new element in the ongoing managerial evolution and the outcome of institutional mission definition and of the decentralisation process, was a first attempt of the faculties at making a five year plan 1995-2000. This plan was intended as a first attempt at strategic planning (defining their mission and objectives, future orientation, way of implementation, etc.) and as an instrument in the dialogue between faculty and institutional leaders, especially with regard to staffing policies.

As a first exercise, these faculty plans show great diversity in quality, in quantity, in topics referred to, etc., mainly due to time limits on the one hand and to the importance attached to this plan by the faculty itself on the other hand (faculty planning was a top-down decision).

Careful preparation, reflection on expected outcomes and “ownership” by the faculty and its members, seem to be some of the necessary conditions to make these plans useful and effectively used instruments in a strategic planning process. This clearly follows from the planning document of the Faculty of Law, which was not “a quick response to a quick question”.

Appointment and promotion policy

Together with the allocation of resources, decision-making on appointment and promotion of staff are of vital importance for the institution and for the faculties (who “buy” staff with the allocated money). That’s the reason why appointment and promotion of staff is subject to an incisive interplay between decision-makers on both levels and a strict procedure is set up. An important role in this negotiation process is played by basic general principles of the K.U. Leuven staffing policies.

Some of these are:

- tenure of academic staff is primarily awarded on the basis of proven research quality;
- promotion of academic staff is based on the quality of research *and* teaching, and is never automatic (every rank can be a final rank);
- keep the relative share of tenured academic staff within specified limits in order to have room for flexibility and for ‘new blood’ policies;
- reduction of administrative staff in favour of academic staff, and shift in administrative staff from lower to higher qualifications.

Quality audit of management services

This is an ongoing project which we only want to mention here. It aims at a better client-service relationship, based on more efficiency and effectiveness in all service-oriented parts of the institution and on better communication. It also wants to improve the decision-making capacity at all levels of the institution

3. EVALUATION OF EDUCATIONAL QUALITY

3.1. The context

Educational quality has always been a concern at the K.U. Leuven. However, for more than twenty years, evaluation of educational quality was characterised by fragmentation, lack of co-ordination, lack of coherent vision, and voluntarism.

At the level of individual courses and professors, instruments were made available to academics as to enable them to get insight in strengths and weaknesses of isolated elements of the educational process, such as their lecturing behaviour (the EVADOC -- instrument, Janssen and De Neve, 1987) or self-composed textbooks (questionnaire of printed materials, Elen, Lowyck, and Van den Branden, 1991). Outcomes of such evaluation studies were privately discussed by members of the central educational support office (DUO) with the requesting professor but not communicated to anybody else. Newly appointed professors were invited to participate in a teacher training programme during which various aspects of learning and teaching were discussed.

At the programme level, *permanent curriculum commissions* were and are responsible for continuously monitoring educational quality. In view of this monitoring task, some permanent curriculum commissions organised from time to time an evaluation of the educational programme they were responsible for, or requested study load measurements.

Although the university officially considered research, education and community service to be the three prominent functions, *appraisal commissions* in each of the faculties, responsible for advice on tenure and promotion, and the Academic Council of the university, had no systematic means in order to take education quality into account. The lack of systematic evaluative information also hampered the development of a consistent policy to promote educational quality. Consequently, decisions for tenure and promotion of academics were predominantly -- if not exclusively -- based on research-related criteria. As such, the K.U. Leuven did not deviate from current practices in the eighties both nationally and internationally.

This situation has changed rapidly. The new decree regulating the activities of universities and pressure from the side of students served as catalysators for the elaboration of a systematic educational evaluation procedure.

Pressure from the students' side became very high in 1993. Students made a huge endeavour to elaborate their own system for educational quality assessment. During the opening ceremony of the academic year 1993-1994, they proposed to use it as the official system of the university given the lack of a system available at the university. The university took this opportunity to reach one of its strategic goals and to comply with the decree. Immediately it took the initiative to negotiate an evaluation system with the students. These negotiations between representatives from the university and the students' union turned 1993-1994 into an experimental year, with 16 study years² being evaluated. Experiences with the experimental procedure and discussions in a task force on quality assessment, installed by the Academic Council, resulted in a more far-reaching and successful procedure with respect to the use of evaluation outcomes. This procedure and its effects are discussed

2. A study year is a fixed part of a curriculum. It is composed of a fixed number of courses to be followed by the students. At the end of the academic year, students get exams for each course followed during that year.

in the next section. Along with a retrospective quality monitoring system, pro-active initiatives have also been taken. While retrospective or reactive initiatives are mainly oriented toward ensuring high quality of existing practices, pro-active initiatives aim at changing these practices in order to make the educational system more effective and efficient.

3.2. A system for internal educational quality assessment

Elements mentioned above resulted in the elaboration of an internal review system prepared by a task force and approved by the Academic Council. Both in the task force and the Academic Council, academics and students are represented. The task force consisted of representatives of the deans, representatives of students and some experts with respect to the organisation and implementation of educational processes. Information about the principles and the procedures have been widely distributed within the university in order to keep all informed.

3.2.1. Principles

The internal review system is based on six principles. The first two relate to the underlying philosophy, the other four structure the procedure and its timing.

Decentralised responsibility in view of enhancing feelings of ownership.

Regularly, evaluation of educational quality takes the form of a centrally distributed questionnaire that tackles various aspects of university teaching (e.g. Tagomori, 1994). In such case, the questionnaire is (nearly) identical for all curricula, all subject-matters, and educational methods used and distributed by a central body. This approach while enabling easy comparison, may result in refusal of evaluation outcomes when questions in the questionnaire are regarded to be inadequate as to assess the educational situation in a specific context. Moreover, faculties and its members may refuse to take the outcomes into account when they perceive it to be enforced by an 'external' body. Finally, a questionnaire may sometimes be an inadequate method as to gather data on questions about educational quality within a specific context.

In view of strengthening the use of evaluation outcomes, faculties have been made themselves responsible. By doing so, feelings of ownership grow which leads to greater acceptance of the outcomes. Moreover, evaluation efforts can be more easily tuned toward specific problems and/or needs in the separate groups. The central level has not provided a questionnaire. In order to guarantee quality however, the Academic Council has agreed upon a number of procedural steps the faculties have to follow in their evaluation efforts (Werkgroep Kwaliteitszorg, 1994; 1995). Moreover, extensive support has been provided to the faculties with respect to the execution of the evaluation procedure. By decentralising responsibility but imposing a procedure, the university has made an attempt to avoid as much as possible problems related to centralisation and decentralisation (for an overview of such problems: Clune, 1993).

Focus on improving educational quality

From the start on, the university pointed out that an in-depth rather than a formal/superficial improvement of educational quality is aimed at. Better education rather than higher scores on always

questionable questionnaires is the goal. By putting improvement and innovation of education up front, the danger of having staff members to attribute reasons for problems and failures to external sources rather than to oneself, as well as of escape behaviour may be avoided. Defensive reactions are -- as much as possible -- discouraged. They would have been promoted when repressive use of results would have been stressed. A crucial element therefore, are the "follow-up" plans. Evaluation results are regarded to be the starting point for an in-depth discussion about remediation, improvement and innovation between the evaluation commission on the one hand and the permanent curriculum commission or the individuals on the other. The discussion results in follow-up plans that specify, along with deadlines, activities to be undertaken.

However, the university also wanted to clearly and consistently communicate the seriousness of the evaluation operations. The Academic Council made very clear that high standards with regard to education were the ultimate goal. Less than optimal evaluation outcomes are conceived as the starting point for remediation. Refusal to co-operate and consistently negative outcomes, will be regarded to be negative. In this perspective, it has also been decided -- and this gives necessary pressure for some -- that results may be taken into account for appointment and promotion. Never, however, bare results on individuals would be made available to the central level. Only evaluation reports, containing the results, an interpretation of the evaluation commission, comments by the individual and -- in case -- the follow-up plan can be considered for decision-making about selection or promotion. Considering evaluation reports rather than bare results avoids oversimplification problems often related to various types of performance indicators (Ball and Wilkinson, 1994).

Quality assessment based on a specification of educational goals and quality criteria

Evaluation aims at deciding whether and to what extent reality corresponds to an 'ideal' situation. In order to decide about the correspondence between reality and the situation aimed at, in other words in order to evaluate, aims and quality criteria have to be available, hence specified in advance. In the absence of pre-specified educational goals and quality criteria, evaluators have no basis as to decide whether something is educationally positive or negative. Finally, a specification of educational goals and quality criteria also helps academics to improve their contributions to education as they get to know the direction in which they may have to change.

Curricula as the basic evaluation unit

The use of evaluation results is hampered when the evaluation is restricted to isolated elements. Indeed, when particular courses or even study years are evaluated separately, there is a tendency to blame other courses or study years, and to attribute problems to non-evaluated curriculum elements. A more encompassing approach provides a more solid evaluation framework and enables both to situate specific problems in their context and to formulate more easily implementable solutions. Moreover, by taking the curriculum as the basic evaluation unit, more people are involved which creates a greater innovation capacity. Hence, the system for quality assessment indicates to consider educational quality as such as well as context-related factors.

Evaluation commission

It has been an important concern of the university, to create a procedure that: 1) has credibility to both academics and students; 2) enables to improve educational quality at the curriculum level to the

least, and 3) does not disturb too much ongoing activities. Therefore, although faculties as a whole are responsible, the actual work is executed by a specific evaluation commission appointed for a 2-year period and consisting of two representatives of each of the different groups in the faculty (tenured faculty, temporary faculty, students). This commission is chaired by another faculty member. Given the central role of this chair, (s)he is expected to have authority in educational matters and to actively support the principles of the quality management system.

Integration of internal and external quality assessment

The Flemish law on universities imposes an external quality assessment every eight to ten years and a continuous internal quality monitoring system. In order to co-ordinate evaluation activities within the K.U. Leuven and to avoid complexity and confusion, one educational evaluation approach has been adopted. While quality monitoring remains an ongoing activity for permanent curriculum commissions, it has been decided that every four to five years an in-depth evaluation of education quality would be carried out. Every eight to ten years this in-depth evaluation is part of the preparation of the self-study report in view of the peer review by the 'visiting committee'. The integration of internal and external quality assessment increases the probability of the use of evaluation outcomes. Internal quality assessments are no longer noncommittal due to the pressure provided by the external assessment.

The Academic Council monitors operations in this respect by discussing follow-up plans that result from comments by visiting committees.

3.2.2. Procedure

With regard to the use of evaluation outcomes, a distinction is to be made between the programme or curriculum level and the results about particular elements of that curriculum, namely courses. Evaluation results at the level of the programme pertain to the content of the curriculum, the structure (relationships and balance) of the curriculum, and to overall outcomes with regard to teaching, course materials, and examinations. Evaluation results about individual curriculum elements pertain primarily to quality and relevance of content, teaching behaviour, availability and quality of course materials and examinations.

For both types of outcomes a similar approach has been adopted (see Figure 1) in an attempt to contribute concretely to the optimisation of educational quality. This approach consists of the following steps:

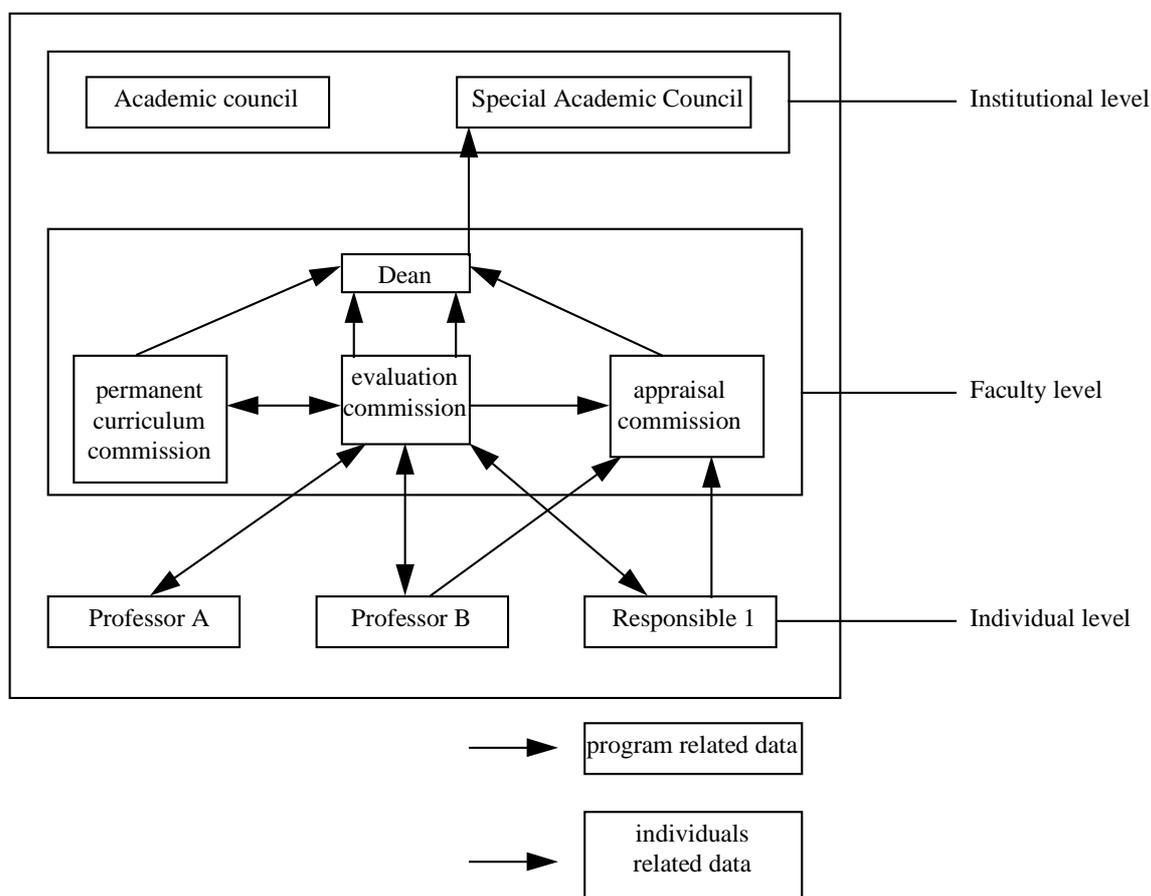
- Interpretation by the evaluation commission of the evaluation outcomes and elaboration of preliminary follow-up plan by considering the educational framework (goals and quality criteria) elaborated at the beginning of the operation;
- Discussion by the president of the commission of the first version of the evaluation report with either the permanent curriculum commission (programme/curriculum level) or the responsible academic (course level) in order to gather their comments and suggestions for remediation and/or further improvement;
- Elaboration of global report (programme/curriculum level) and individual reports (course level) by the evaluation commission. Both types of reports consist of four parts:

a) evaluation outcomes; b) interpretation by evaluation commission; c) comments by either permanent curriculum commission or responsible academic; and -- if needed -- d) follow-up plan specifying actions to be undertaken;

- Distribution of the reports. All members of the permanent curriculum commission get a copy of the global report. Individual reports are sent to the responsible academic and the dean(s). The president of the commission also keeps a copy; and
- Monitoring by the evaluation commission of the execution of follow-up plans.

In principle the mandate of the evaluation commission ends after two years. In case, however, follow-up plans have not been completely or successfully executed, this mandate may get extended by the dean.

Figure 1. Information flow related to quality improvement



Through means of the follow-up plans and the monitoring task of the evaluation commission, the university aims at increasing the probability of use of evaluation outcomes. Additional pressure is provided by the decision to take evaluation reports into account during the procedure for promotion and course appointment.

In order to illustrate the current impact of the procedure, it is to be specified that courses are assigned for five year periods only. This implies that every five year, the appraisal commission has to

formulate an advice about continuation. Evaluation reports are considered therefore every five years for 'new' as well as for experienced professors. As to speed up the use of evaluation reports, some faculties (Arts; Physical Education and Kinesitherapy) decided to temporarily restrict appointment periods to two rather than five years.

3.3. Quality assurance on its way: the case of 1994-1995 and 1995-1996

In the above the formal internal quality assessment system has been described. In the following sections, 'reality' is described. In addition to the formal system, other quality related initiatives are discussed as to illuminate the relative nature of the formal system.

3.3.1. Informal internal permanent quality assurance initiatives

Initiatives to monitor and/or improve educational quality are taken continuously by permanent curriculum commissions and individuals.

Activities of permanent curriculum commissions

Permanent curriculum commissions are responsible for continuously monitoring educational quality of one particular educational programme. Part of their job is to discuss the objectives of courses, to approve examination methods (oral, written, etc.) and instructional methods, and all kinds of practical problems related to the programme. One third of the permanent curriculum commissions are students. They consist of a minimum of four and a maximum of 20 students along with delegates from tenured and temporary academic staff. In contrast to evaluation commissions, permanent curriculum commissions are -as their name says- not temporary but permanent. The relationship between permanent curriculum commissions and evaluation commissions is comparable to the relation between a council and an autonomous but temporary task force.

In order to execute their monitoring task, permanent evaluation commissions may commission all kinds of evaluation studies, such as programme evaluations or textbook analyses, and investigations of study load. As an indicator of the activity level of permanent curriculum commissions, Table 1 provides an overview of requests of evaluation studies since 1990-1991.

Table 1. Requests for programme evaluations / study load measures

	Evaluations
1990-1991	5
1991-1992	5
1992-1993	3
1993-1994	4
1994-1995	4
1995-1996	3

The table reveals a limited number of spontaneous requests when the number of permanent evaluation commissions, namely 80, is considered. In the absence of some kind of external pressure as operationalised through a more or less formal system of quality assessment, attention for evaluating the programme is not absent but limited. Moreover, the availability of such a formal system since

1993 has decreased but not completely replaced these initiatives. This is partly due to the fact that most of these evaluations pertain to post-graduate educational programmes, which are not yet included in the time table for formal quality assessment.

An important task of permanent curriculum commissions is to monitor continuously the goals of the programme and the kind of courses offered. It is their duty to propose and implement changes to the curriculum. Therefore, an additional indicator of the activity of these commissions can be found in requests to change the curriculum. These requests are known as they have to be approved by the Academic Council. At least two curriculum changes in two years have been proposed as the immediate result of an internal and an external quality assessment process.

Activities initiated by individuals

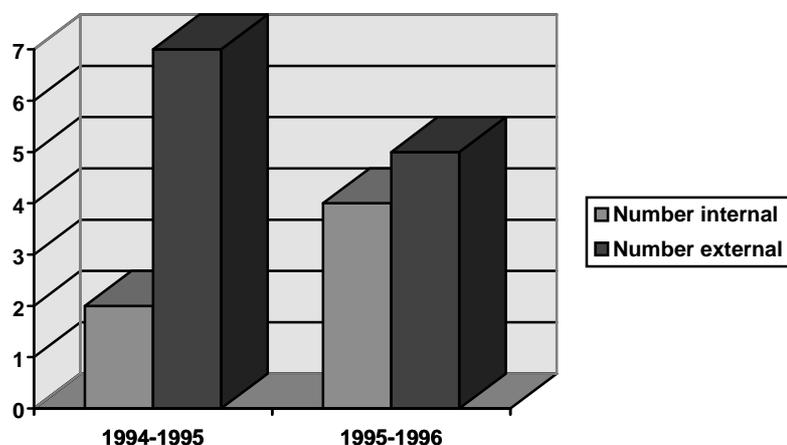
At a university with about 3 450 temporary and tenured academic staff, it is impossible to register all initiatives taken by individuals. Indeed, the most active instructional ingredient largely remains a black box to the central level of the university. Nevertheless, some data may indicate changes as to the awareness about the importance of educational quality. At any moment, individual academics may request to evaluate their teaching. Reviewing centrally received requests of this kind, a continuous growth can be observed. The exact numbers may be attributed mainly to two factors: from 1990 freshly appointed professors are encouraged to follow a teaching training program. Evaluation of their teaching was an integral though optional element of the teacher training till 1993. In 1994-1995 evaluation commissions started their activities. Some professors requested an additional evaluation in order to confirm or falsify results found and interpretations made by the evaluation commissions.

Overall it must be concluded that with respect to education, staff members wait for initiatives from a more centrally located body. These initiatives are welcomed and taken as an opportunity for development. This might imply that a clear and consistent educational quality policy may result in more awareness about the importance of education and more investments in its quality.

3.3.2. Formal internal quality assessment initiatives

In order to avoid evaluation overload a time table has been constructed in which each programme has a slot. The time table especially considers the schedule for external quality in co-operation with the other Flemish and Dutch universities. An attempt is made to keep the number of programmes to be evaluated during one academic year constant. Figure 2 gives an overview of the number of active evaluation commissions either as part of the internal quality assessment programme or in preparation of an external quality assessment. It is important to recapitulate that completion of the procedure takes two years. This means that normally, and for programmes within the external quality assessment program, preparation of the self-study report and the visit of peers takes place during the second year of the internal quality assessment procedure. It is to be mentioned that sometimes evaluation commissions evaluate more than one educational programme. This depends on the specific structure within the faculties and agreements made with the other Flemish and Dutch universities.

Figure 2. **Number of commissions involved in the internal quality assessment procedure**



With an average of nine commissions starting the procedure every year, it is prospected to have evaluated all non-postgraduate educational programmes within a period of five years. As the procedure lasts 2 years, each academic year about 18 programmes are actively involved in some kind of evaluation.

In order to give some impression about the extent of the investment, Table 2 gives an overview of the involvement of different groups and of the methods used.

Table 2. **Groups and methods**

	1994-1995	1995-1996
Educational programmes evaluated	13	12
Number of study years evaluated	41	63
Number of evaluation units (courses)	1 148	1 098
Number of students-respondents	3 643	2 025
Total number of questionnaires	68 500	24 598

3.4. Quality improvement projects

Any formal evaluation system is both retrospective and conservative as long as it takes the current situation for granted. Moreover, there is an implicit danger that evaluation becomes an end in itself rather than a simple means for innovation and improvement. That is why it is important to look at pro-active initiatives to improve education as well.

3.4.1. *Informal departmental quality improvement projects*

Similar to the comment made with respect to individuals, it is also to be said that initiatives taken by permanent curriculum commissions remain largely unknown to the central level of the university. Permanent curriculum commissions have no systematic means as to communicate their strategies, initiatives and results. If they want to communicate something to the rest of the university community they have to rely on their dean or the representative of their faculty in the educational council. Statements about the innovative capacity and activity level of permanent curriculum commissions may therefore both under- and overestimate what actually happens.

By and large, however, the overall impression is that education is regarded as a job to be done and not as a challenge that requires continuous reflection, time and sufficient resources by a large portion of staff members. This may be partly explained by the repetitive nature of aspects of the teaching task, but also by perceptions about the more challenging nature of research and high pressure in this respect..

3.4.2. *Formal central quality improvement projects*

The double focus in quality improvement, retrospective with a focus on systematic evaluation and pro-active has become a major line of thinking within the university. A variety of elements point in that direction. The most recent illustration has been the membership of the university of Leuven to a consortium for educational innovation. The consortium has been initiated by the Dutch Open University and consists of a restricted number of higher education institutions in the Netherlands and Flanders. Membership of this consortium builds upon a number of previous attempts to start with pilot-projects initiated and monitored by the Educational Council. In this realm pilot projects with respect to development of computer-assisted instruction and fostering deep-level learning have been initiated. Furthermore, a research project has been started to investigate how skill, and practice-related curriculum components, can be optimised. Finally, the university continues to invest in training programmes for beginning professors and assistants.

Integration of technology in educational programmes

As a concrete result of long lasting discussions within various committees and task forces about the use of technology in education, a selection committee of the Educational Council has selected three projects as pilot projects aiming at developing computer assisted instruction. In the first run, only projects were selected that (a) were oriented towards the first two cycles of the basic academic programmes and (b) intended to develop programmes, not buy or adapt existing ones. An offer for instructional design support was provided but only scarcely used. Each of the selected projects had to (a) create a programme or set of programmes, and (b) document know how acquired during the development process. Especially the second objective was regarded to be important as it would result in knowledge transferable to future projects. After two years, however, it must be admitted that neither of the two objectives were really achieved. In most projects fully operational and innovative programmes were not developed and in none of the projects know how was sufficiently documented. Nevertheless, some programmes were made and new insights were acquired.

It has been concluded from these projects that in order to be successful more support is to be delivered. This support is technical and relates to the selection of appropriate development tools but also and in the first place educational. It must be acknowledged that most professors lack instructional design knowledge that would enable them to design and develop high quality courseware. Therefore, the Educational Council decided to initiate a project to consolidate existing expertise with regard to the use of technologies for instruction. This project now results in a WWW-information source that delivers responses to all kinds of questions of potential designers of instructional software (Elen, Hendrikx and Proost, 1996).

Technology is seen by academic responsables as an important tool for innovating teaching at the university. Therefore an institute has been installed that specifically pays attention to the use of telematics for postgraduate courses and continuing education. Through participation in various European projects, know how is developed that later on may also be useful to regular educational programmes. It can be seen here that programmes at the postgraduate level are more open for innovation. Various reasons may account for this: they are more specialised, hence the link between research is more tight; the number of students is limited, hence more close contact between students and professors, and in most cases the link with practice is more evident which imposes some pressure on the educational quality of the programmes.

Deep-level learning projects

Conceptions about learning and instruction at the university level are gradually changing. While for a long period the lecture-model has dominated university teaching in Belgian universities, gradually a new model is appearing at the university of Leuven. Ever more, university teachers become aware of the fact that delivering information in lectures might help some students to acquire basic knowledge and some understanding but that it hardly contributes to deep-level learning. Acknowledgement is growing that learning is the result of activities engaged in by the learner rather than the outcome of instruction. Lecturing while beneficial to some students for a limited set of goals is not generally approved anymore. While problems are known with regard to the lecture-model, how it should be replaced is far from clear. Therefore, the Educational Council supported a number of projects that aim at fostering deep-level learning of students through a variety of means. In most of these projects it has been attempted to make students responsible for their own learning. In order to support them, a number of tools and information sources were made available. In one of the projects, professors

responsible for a variety of courses in the first year of the educational sciences programme have attempted to foster deep-level learning by focusing on processing of original scientific and/or philosophical texts. It has become clear in this project that while the number of lecture hours may be diminished, the number of contact hours for each student may increase when deep-level learning is aimed at. Moreover, new objectives and a new examination system have to be constructed. The need for more ample tutoring is the consequence of more tasks given to the students. Recently a task force has been installed by the Educational Council that should develop a master plan on the implementation of deep-level learning at the university.

Knowledge application

Regularly, external and internal quality assessments have pointed to the poor quality of skill-related components of curricula. Summarised, the complaint is that students at the university know a lot but cannot transfer their knowledge to practice and real problems. They do not know how to apply what they have learned. Nevertheless, various exercises and practical sessions are organised.

Confronted with this situation and considering the outcomes of a first analysis by a dedicated task force, the Educational Council has initiated a research project. It aims at clarifying the variety of functions of practice-oriented curriculum components, specifying the methods most appropriate for realising these functions, and describing a number of good cases. Outcomes of the study will be used *a)* to develop a specific evaluation instrument; *b)* to develop suitable training programmes; and *c)* to elaborate a plan for the optimisation of practice-oriented curriculum elements.

Training of professors and assistants

The K.U. Leuven wants to deliver high-quality research. In order to become tenured one must be able to show an excellent research record. Teaching skills normally are not a condition for appointment. However, teaching, research and service are officially equally valued. Because one may not assume teaching skills to be readily available, the university has decided to heavily invest in a teaching training programme. Newly appointed professors are invited to this programme which consists of one two-day residential seminar on learning and instruction and three one-day sessions on teaching, technology and examinations. In addition, all professors of the university are invited to modules about the development of printed materials, teaching in large groups, tutoring of students, etc. Finally, the university plans to organise regularly workshops about university teaching delivered by internationally respected experts.

3.5. Monitoring internal quality assessments

3.5.1. Procedure

The initiatives for quality assessment are continuously monitored by a variety of groups and councils. Each evaluation commission has to deliver a process-report in which problems and comments can be given relating to the procedure. This report is discussed in the permanent curriculum commission and afterwards in the Educational Council. Based on its discussion this council then prepares a synthesis for discussion at the Executive Committee and Academic Council.

At the end of the first year the following comments were made by the evaluation commissions, retained by the Educational Council and accepted by the Academic Council:

- There is a need for making the procedure more flexible with regard to both constellation of commissions and timings.
- The specific function of the evaluation commission in relation to other commissions with similar functions or responsibilities towards teaching and education has to get clarified.
- The most important part is not the data gathering but the construction of a self-study report and follow-up plans. The main goal of the procedure is not to hamper ongoing activities but to improve educational processes. In this respect it might be indicated to give more administrative support to members of the evaluation commission and, in particular, its chair.
- There is a need for making the educational philosophy of the university more visible and explicit.

3.5.2. *Conditions for success*

In the above, the procedure for using evaluation outcomes currently applied at the K.U. Leuven has been outlined. At this moment a research project, sponsored by the Ministry of Education, has been initiated to identify the basic elements that affect the use of the outcomes. The project focuses, through means of case studies, on the nature of feedback processes in evaluation procedures and the determinants of these processes. Although firm data about the actual use of the evaluation outcomes are not available yet, it can be said that the implementation of the procedure resulted already in an increased awareness of the importance of educational quality and in some specific improvements. It might be concluded therefore that the procedure results in three types of use of evaluation outcomes (see Frederiks *et al.*, 1993): *instrumental use*, direct application of evaluation outcomes either in consolidating / changing educational quality or in human-resources decision-making; *conceptual use*, educational quality is actually considered because decision makers have now the means to do so, this affects their thinking; and *argumentative use*, results at the programme / curriculum level are openly discussed in order to enforce changes or stability. Reflections about the procedure and its implications lead to the identification of five conditions for success.

Decentralised responsibility

In contrast to the experimental year, evaluation commissions express strong feelings of ownership. The evaluation operation is not regarded to be externally imposed. Rather, members of evaluation commissions are heavily involved and seem to feel responsible for actual improvement of educational quality and implementation of improvement plans.

Transparency and credibility of the procedure

As previously specified, an evaluation procedure rather than concrete instruments have been provided to the evaluation commissions. This procedure has been exhaustively described by the task force.

Information about the procedure has been widely distributed. Everybody, academics as well as students, can get a copy of the guidelines for the evaluation commission. In addition, the university journal 'Campuskrant' devoted several articles to the operation. These measures reduced nervousity and increased credibility.

One comprehensive procedure

Crucial elements of the procedure are the follow-up plans and their monitoring. It is also important that one and the same commission is responsible for data gathering, interpretation of outcomes and follow-up. The combination of these tasks avoids problems of miscommunication and changes in orientation. Such problems would, most probably, result in confusion and refusal of the outcomes.

Policy coherence

There has been a serious effort to co-ordinate all communications about the evaluation procedure. All decision-makers were encouraged to stress the importance of the educational quality, acknowledge its novelty and hence the probability of growing pains, and to underscore the feasibility and necessity of the procedure elaborated by the task force.

Availability of non-threatening support

The evaluation procedure asks a lot of investment of time especially because of the lack of any systematic evaluation tradition. In order to reduce the burden of work and to enhance educational professionalism, ample support has been provided by the central level of the university. This support consisted of taking over most work related to questionnaire production, data-gathering and data-processing on the one hand and the provision of educational scientists as advisors to the evaluation commissions on the other hand. This support, however, was non-threatening as none of the advisors is involved in decision-making about selection, appointment or promotion.

In spite of the overall impression of success, some criticism is uttered. It is said that while both the internal and external procedures are fully operational and even successfully implemented, effects are limited after two years of operation. Mainly unacceptable problems have been made visible and have been addressed. However, the question remains whether in addition to the identification and abolishment of intolerable teaching situations and of the production of nice looking and interesting reports, educational quality has been improved as well.

4. INVESTING IN QUALITY MANAGEMENT: A REFLECTION

In the previous sections, the quality management system of the K.U. Leuven was described in its full complexity. In this section a critical reflection on the system is offered. In order to do so, first typical features of the system are highlighted without, however, providing descriptive details. The description does not aim at being evaluative but at highlighting the most important elements. Next, effects of the system are documented. Finally, factors that may explain the outlook of the system and its effects are discussed.

4.1. A characterisation of the quality management system of the K.U. Leuven

Various researchers have pointed to the idea that there is no ideal system for quality management, rather the system should fit the particular context (*e.g.* Van Driel and Van den Berg, 1994). This nominalist position (Van Vught, 1995) does not imply that quality systems differ fundamentally from context to context, or institution to institution. The position does imply that the specific configuration of elements as well as its concrete implementation is typical for and fits the particular context or institution.

With respect to typical features of the quality management system at the K.U. Leuven the following features seem worthwhile to be mentioned.

4.1.1. The quality management system of the K.U. Leuven is primarily an internal one

The decree on the universities offers some external pressure to install a system for quality management. However, without internal pressure and a clear, already existing internal strategy, such an external regulation results in compliance with the formal regulations rather than in the development of an elaborate internal system. On the one hand, external pressure has fostered at the K.U. Leuven calls by the student union representatives to make problems related to education more visible and to handle them more systematically, on the other hand it strengthened the strategic goal to become and/or remain an internationally recognised high quality university. While the internal quality assessment system mainly provides an answer to the internal pressure, the external quality assessment system suits the strategic goal for international recognition. It is important in this respect that external pressure is rather weak. Although the decree opens the possibility for meta-evaluation, the whole quality management movement is only loosely related to accreditation nor is it expected to have any other major implications at the level of formal recognition and/or financing of particular programmes (see for other cases: Van Vught and Westerheijden, 1994; Woodhouse, 1995).

4.1.2. The quality management system of the K.U. Leuven focuses on teaching quality

Any system for quality management can be situated on an accountability and a quality improvement dimension (Van Vught and Westerheijden, 1994). It is typical for the Leuven system to pay attention nearly exclusively to quality improvement issues and hardly any to accountability issues. Most attention is devoted to analysing educational process elements such as teaching behaviour, coursetexts, exams, study time, and the practical organisation of the instructional environment. Far less attention is devoted to more product-related criteria such as the relevance of the goals, the productivity and efficiency of educational and organisational structures or even the quality of subject matter delivered and the fit between instructional goals and methods. The quality of the delivery (*e.g.* teaching behaviour) rather than the relevance of the delivery itself or the quality of what is delivered (*e.g.* subject matter) gets investigated. Illustrative in this perspective is the frequent use of questionnaires to be filled in by students.

Moreover and in contrast to practices in other countries such as Australia (Watson, Hallett, and Diamond, 1995), management of educational and research quality are strictly separated. In order to foster attention for educational matters, a specific quality management system for educational issues has been established. Community service functions are not addressed by either the educational evaluation nor the research evaluation system.

4.1.3. The quality management system of the K.U. Leuven is primarily evaluative or reactive

Quality management in the field of education may be oriented towards developing and implementing educational plans which can be initiated at the top and/or the bottom of the institution (Watson *et al.*, 1995). Institutions with this kind of quality management system may be said to be proactive in their educational policy. Educational policy may also be more reactive. The actual situation is then taken as the point of departure for remediation and innovation. While recent policy decisions, such as the installation of the Leuven Institute for New Educational Methods and the membership to the consortium for innovation in higher education, point into the direction of a more proactive policy, the quality management system currently operating is primarily reactive. Evaluation of current practices and formulation of suggestions for improvement are the two main tasks of both internal and external quality assessment committees.

4.1.4. The quality management system of the K.U. Leuven is decentralised

Quality management systems can be more or less centralised. In view of increasing feelings of ownership, both the internal and the external system at the K.U. Leuven have been conceptualised as decentralised. The central level is only supporting activities of decentralised entities, it does not assume any responsibility. However, considering the strategic importance and the internal pressure, the central level of the university is not absent. First, a procedure, formally approved by the academic council, has been installed that ensures comparability of the various sectoral evaluation processes. Second, committees at the decentralised levels are supported by the central level both with respect to the execution of the evaluation process, the administrative load connected to this process, and, even more importantly, report writing.

4.1.5. The quality management system of the K.U. Leuven is characterised by follow-up strategies

Similar to most evaluation procedures (Van Vught and Westerheijden, 1994), the procedure installed follows the typical research approach (making explicit theoretical framework, setting hypotheses, developing research instruments, data-gathering, data interpretation, reporting) and involves both self-assessments and/or peer reviews. It differs from this approach and from a lot of other systems by its complement, follow-up strategies. The second year of internal quality assessment projects are exclusively devoted to follow-up and one year after publication of the report by external reviewers a remediation report is to be presented to and to be discussed in the academic council.

4.1.6. Results of the quality management system of the K.U. Leuven are semi-public

When and to whom to distribute results of evaluation remains an unresolved issue. Rapid and broad distribution of results increases probably pressure for compliance. This compliance however, may be formal rather than real. At the K.U. Leuven a balance has been looked for. Results are distributed more widely when the content of the information becomes less individual. Evaluation outcomes directly related to individuals are available to those who are immediately concerned. Evaluation outcomes related to courses and the programme are available to everybody related to those courses or that programme. Comments at the programme level made by external reviewers are made public and often discussed in newspapers.

4.1.7. *The quality management system of the K.U. Leuven is owned by internal stakeholders*

The quality management system has an internal and an external component. In both cases, however, activities by members of the university are more important to quality management than the activities of external reviewers (Van Driel and Van den Berg, 1994). External agencies are not empowered to impose procedures and/or reviewers on the university while the university through the interuniversity agency co-determines the procedure as well as the selection of peer reviewers. It can be said therefore that both the internal and external system is, in contrast to for instance the situation in Scotland (Dickinson, Pollock, and Troy, 1995), -- at least partially -- owned by the university. Both for the internal and the external component specific commissions are installed. University professors take the lead in these commissions. They are regarded to be able and willing to look critically at their own educational activity. At the same time, students are involved at each stage of the process as the primary stakeholders. The opportunity to have external stakeholders to be involved as well, is only exceptionally used. Responsibility for quality management system at the K.U. Leuven has been encommisioned.

By installing specific committees for quality management and making specific bodies and persons at the central level responsible for providing support, the quality management process looses a direct link with other managerial tasks and may withdraw responsibility for educational quality from those directly involved, university professors, but not member of the evaluation commission. This may provide an explanation why despite information campaigns only a limited number of university staff members have a good insight in the evaluation process and/or are interested in evaluation outcomes at the programme level.

4.2. An appraisal of the effects of the quality management system at the K.U. Leuven

The formal system for quality management at the K.U. Leuven, which in itself might be an effect from the decree, has resulted in a number of changes in teaching and decision-making about educational issues. Other aspects have remained unaffected. In this section, an appraisal is made of the effects by paying attention to what has and has not changed at the micro-level, the meso-level, and the macro-level.

In the above it has been said that the quality management system is oriented towards improving the quality of the educational process. Consequently, at this stage most effects can be retrieved at the micro-level or the level at which education is delivered (university teachers and permanent curriculum commissions). Evaluations carried out have revealed numerous problems, most of them already known implicitly to individuals but never tackled as they were not made visible in any systematic way. University professors either alone or grouped in the permanent educational commissions have reacted in three different ways to these problems. In most cases, individuals have accepted the results and have tried to change their teaching behaviour, improve exercises, produce or select a better coursetext, make more deliberate decisions about exam questions and exam format. Sometimes the result has been more co-operation between colleagues and better agreements on the subject matter to be covered. In a limited number of cases, evaluation outcomes have induced curricular changes. A second group of university professors and/or permanent education commissions have neglected the outcomes. This group is not larger than 10 per cent of all those evaluated. The system has not resulted in a reflection nor action about ways to (further) improve the quality of education. A third group (5 per cent of those evaluated to the most) has reacted negatively to the outcomes *1*) by refusing to change because of disagreements about (aspects of) the evaluation

itself or about the underlying educational philosophy or 2) by questioning the validity of the research outcomes or the appropriateness of the evaluation methodology.

One may wonder what reasons can account for these different types of reactions and especially the negative reactions. Three sources for vulnerability of educational are proposed:

- The evaluation procedure roughly follows a research-like approach. University professors are regarded to be research experts and hence are trained to detect methodological flaws. One may expect, therefore, that each of the steps (formulation of education philosophy, data gathering with selection of data gathering method and respondents, data processing, and interpretation) can be discussed. For each of them indeed critical comments have been made.
- To be a university professor is a multi-dimensional and very demanding profession. It might be expected, therefore, that different members of that profession have a different understanding of it and stress different aspects. Problems may arise when research and or community service are more highly valued in one's professional understanding than education. Such an understanding of one's profession may result in a lack of commitment for and sensitivity to educational matters. Nevertheless, given the high requirements for quality especially in the domain of research, it remains surprising to see how well-known researchers, do not apply the same quality criteria when it comes to education and lack self-critical skills in these matters. How to foster the transfer of critical skills from one aspect of the profession (*e.g.* research) to an other (*e.g.* teaching), remains a difficult issue for 'quality managers'.
- The context itself induces a lack of attention for educational matters as messages about the relative importance are very unclear. Officially research and education at the university are said to be closely related and equally valued. However, when it comes to power structures and financing, research is valued most. It takes more than two years to install a new culture and adapt structures and processes.

The meso-level refers to the level of the departments and faculties. Again it is to be noted that the establishment of the system itself within a limited period is a major innovation at the meso-level. Never before was there a structure within the faculties that could handle seriously and systematically problems related to education. Of course, there were permanent curriculum commissions, but these did not succeed to monitor and improve educational quality partly because of inadequate conceptions of collegiality. Repeatedly, it has been mentioned by evaluation commission members that the openness within the commission between faculty members, staff members and students was a completely new experience. Apart from this effect, effects of the quality management system are rare at this stage. We know of two cases where the course-assignment period has, temporarily, been reduced from five to two years and of only one case where, as a consequence of the evaluation procedure, new procedures for monitoring quality were installed. This implies that in nearly all other cases the activities of the evaluation commissions remain one-shot operations. They do not enter the structures nor the culture of the departments and faculties. The lack of intruding effects at the meso-level highlights the pivotal role of the deans. Deans are responsible for monitoring the process and eventually to take initiatives as to solve structural problems and lasting person-related problems. Members of evaluation commissions and especially their chairs must be convinced about the support of the dean and his/her sincere willingness to value and continuously improve education. This implies more than a formal commitment to the procedure. It requires deans to show a continuous

interest in and monitoring of the operations of the evaluation commission, clear messages about the ultimate goals of the quality management system and immediate supportive action to the commission if appropriate. These new and challenging tasks are at this stage not executed by all the deans. Some of them do not back up the evaluation commissions and seem to fear interviews with faculty members. They do not install systems as to foster and consolidate the initiatives taken by the evaluation commissions. In some cases, deans themselves have been found to be critical about the quality management system. Lack of support by the deans is detrimental and contra-productive especially because it are the deans, assembled in the academic council,

At the macro-level or the level of the central councils and institutions of the university a number of effects can be traced. Most importantly, educational matters have become more visible. They are more frequently discussed in the academic council and discussions are based more on annotated data than on idiosyncratic impressions. The installation of a vice-president for educational matters at the central level in addition to an already existing vice-presidents for student affairs and for research matters, is a structural intervention that reveals greater importance attached to education. Another illustration of greater visibility of educational matters is the rule that one year after publication of the external quality review report, the dean of the faculty together with programme responsables has to present to the academic council a report that specifies how suggestions and comments made by the external reviewers are interpreted and used. Finally, the increased visibility of education has also resulted in a recognition of the potential of the support delivered by centrally located persons in these matters and in an increased awareness of the need for a more proactive educational policy.

Outcomes of the evaluation have also been used during discussions about assignment and promotion. A number of applicants were promoted especially because of their contributions to education. It is to be feared, though, that evaluation outcomes have also been used in a negative way, as a means to argue why somebody was not assigned or promoted.

Strikingly, the whole quality management system has not affected the position of the educational council. While process-reports are discussed in the educational council, these discussions hardly affect the whole quality management process. Moreover, while the educational council is the advisory council on education related matters, the increased visibility has not resulted in more requests for advice from the academic council nor from any other body of the university.

This review of effects may be summarised by putting forward that the quality management system resulted in some changes at the micro-level and an increased visibility of education at the macro-level. These changes as well as a greater visibility can be considered to be indicators of a new organisational culture that more strongly values education. However, greater visibility has not yet resulted in major policy changes and certainly at the meso-level a lot remains to be done. Following Argyris (1993), one might argue that quality management has become after two years an espoused theory but certainly not yet a theory in action.

4.3. An attempt to explain the outlook of the system for quality assurance at the K.U. Leuven and its operational characteristics

The system, its operational characteristics and (the absence of) effects are the result of a complex of factors. In order to make the system more manageable, it is important to speculate about the factors that are most important. While certainly not exhaustive, the four following variables are potentially influential factors.

- Statements in the decree are rather vague. They leave ample room for interpretation and rich opportunities for designing a new system. It must be hypothesised therefore that large differences can be found both between and within universities.
- The K.U. Leuven is the largest university in Flanders with about 40 per cent of all the university students. Although competition is growing, compared to universities in North-America and in certain European countries, the K.U. Leuven still operates in a low-competition environment. There is not yet an urgent need to prove rather than to claim quality.

This may be the reason for the lack of attention to accountability issues and the absence of effects at the meso-level. At the macro-level, attention is greater as it is more concerned with long-term strategic planning.

- The quality management system builds upon existing practices to evaluate teaching quality but results from strong pressure from the part of the students. This has been mainly internal pressure focused on process variables. For students, teaching practices is a daily experience. It is far more difficult for them to assess the quality of educational goals and the appropriateness of subject matter delivered. Alternatively, the lack of attention for accountability issues and the focus on process rather than on product elements may also be explained by referring to the influence of educational scientists in the design of the system.
- The system has a lot of elements in common with the Dutch system. The fact that the system has been in place in the Netherlands for a longer period of time and that the quality management system has taken into account the Dutch experiences may provide some explanation for the (to insiders surprising) speed of installation and acceptance of the system. The rate of acceptance -- at least formally -- may also be explained by the research-like nature of the system itself and the direct involvement of university professors.

5. CONCLUSIONS

From the perspective of the K.U. Leuven, the implementation of the quality management system as described above has been a worthwhile accomplishment. Using Kells criteria (see Woodhouse, 1995) the system can even be said to be mature and self-regulating. The installation of the system without major and lasting problems along with the increased visibility of educational matters is a result of the decree on universities nobody would have dared to foretell when the decree was first enforced. Indeed, ten years ago, the mere existence of a system that implies an evaluation of university professors by, amongst others, students would have been inconceivable.

However, what counts is neither the system nor the increased visibility but the educational quality itself (Debrock, 1995). With regard to this, one should be less optimistic as the whole management approach might have to be changed. Van Vught argues that managing of quality is to be replaced by management for quality (Van Vught, 1995) which implies that coherence in the processes of teaching and learning gets stimulated and needs of clients are systematically analysed and responded to. While some individuals certainly try to consider the outcomes of the evaluation endeavours, there is no reason at this stage to believe that educational quality has increased or, in other words, that coherence

has increased or clients' needs are more deliberately considered. Curriculum development and instructional design remain activities to be paid more attention to at the K.U. Leuven. By all means, therefore, the danger should be avoided that the quality management system gets only formally adopted and nice-looking reports are produced while the educational reality remains unaffected. Continuously, the K.U. Leuven as a self-regulating and critical organisation has to investigate how the system itself has to be adapted in order to induce more reflective attention for and activity within the educational domain. Moreover, additional ways to foster educational quality have to get installed. In other words, there is a need to complement the reactive evaluative approach with a proactive and innovative one. This implies a serious commitment by the central level on an educational philosophy. In this respect the university gets squeezed between its Latin-French origin with a focus on lecturing methods and tradition and the current dominant tutoring models with their Anglo-Saxon origin. However, the absence of a profound educational policy in a rapidly changing environment creates a context in which superficial, good-looking, mainly technologically-driven innovations and formal compliance with quality management systems can flourish. Window-dressing rather than increased educational quality might then become the contra-productive, inefficient, and disappointing result.

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ANNEX 1

**BASIC ELEMENTS OF THE INTERNAL AND THE EXTERNAL
QUALITY ASSESSMENT SYSTEM**

Internal

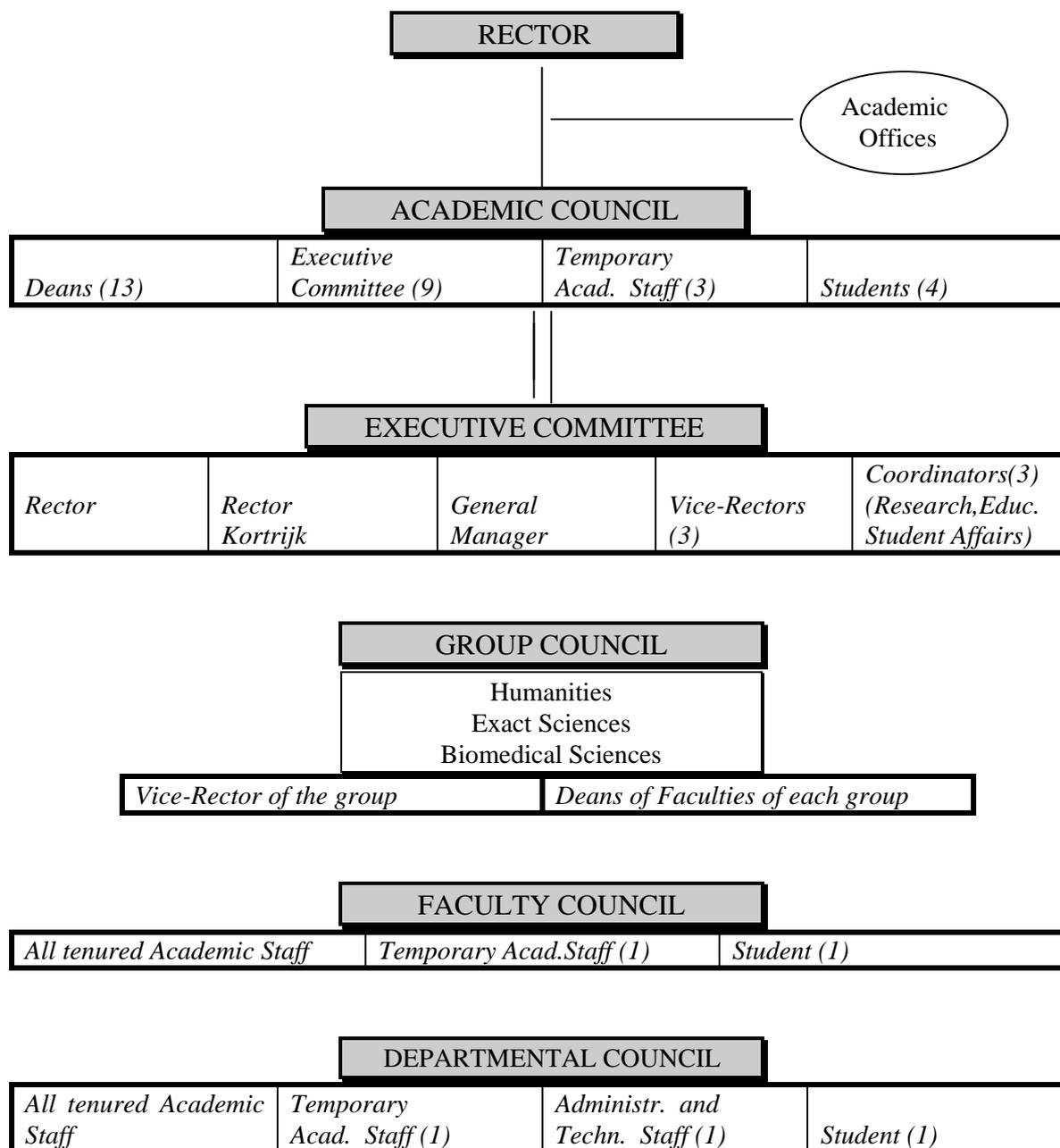
- Object** The academic programme as well as the supplementary programmes of one discipline or a group of related disciplines.
- Method** Self evaluation as the cornerstone, including several stakeholders (students, alumni, employers) and elements which are of importance for the external evaluation.
- Follow-up** The annual report gives an overview of follow-up activities related to this internal quality assessment.
- Periodicity** The frequency of the internal assessments is determined by the institution, taking into account the duration of the programme and the frequency of the external quality assurance.

External

- Object** The academic programme as well as the supplementary programmes of one discipline or a group of related disciplines in the different organising universities.
- Method** Quality assessment by a group of external experts, based on the self-study reports and leading to a public report.
- Follow-up** The VLIR yearly reports to the minister on the functioning of the external quality assurance system.
- Periodicity** Every discipline is subject to external quality assessment at least once in every 10 years. The VLIR and the institutions determine every year the list of disciplines to be assessed, taking into account the duration of the discipline as well as the financial and personnel requirements.

ANNEX 2

DECISION-MAKING STRUCTURE OF THE K.U. LEUVEN



ANNEX 3**PROGRAMMES EVALUATED
FOLLOWING THE INTERNAL QUALITY ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE****As part of the internal quality assessment programme**

1994-1995:

- Philology: Latin-Greek
- Engineering: Architecture

1995-1996:

- Sociology
- Informatics
- Engineering: Computer sciences
- Engineering: Materials Science

In preparation of an external quality assessment

1994-1995:

- Mathematics
- Archeology and art-sciences
- Physical education
- Engineering: electrotechnics
- Kinesitherapy
- Law; canonic law; notarial studies
- Medecine

1995-1996:

- Eastern Cultures (Sinology, Japanology, Old and Near East, Biblic sciences, Arab sciences)
- Theology
- Philosophy
- Biology
- Economic sciences