

**THE UNIVERSITEIT MAASTRICHT  
NETHERLANDS**

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## **1. The quality assessment (QA) context**

Since 1986, the institutional system of quality assessment (QA) in the Netherlands, or “*onderwijsvisitaties*” has been carried out by the VSNU, an association of Dutch universities consisting of the fourteen institutions of higher education which “own” the system. The QA system involves a six-year cycle of programme reviews to assess accountability and quality improvement. External committees comprised peers of the programmes being assessed carry out the review on a disciplinary basis and institution-wide; research is reviewed independently. These reviews are meant to complement internal quality assessment systems which include a document summarising the faculty self-analysis exercise carried out prior to the review. Final committee reports are public as per the system’s accountability.<sup>1</sup> The Inspectorate for Higher Education, a relatively independent agency of the Ministry of Education, assesses the system and the institutional response to review reports.

When the *visitaties* began a decade ago, all participants understood that the Ministry of Education would not introduce a governmental QA system so as long as the *visitaties* were adequate and the results were taken seriously by the faculties or the institutions. This implied a balance of power between the government and the institutions.

## **2. Ensuring internal QA**

### **2.1. Problem-based learning (PBL)**

Quality assurance at the Universiteit Maastricht (UM) began with the problem-based learning system (PBL), an innovative, centralised educational vision and method. The origins of the internal QA system reflect the major characteristics of PBL.<sup>2</sup>

PBL positions itself with respect to the teaching/learning dichotomy. Where classical methods lean heavily on teaching, PBL centres on learning. The key issue is to create an environment that stimulates and guides students to actively acquire knowledge. Individual learning and learning in peer groups rather than lectures thus become important. Students in peer groups decide on learning objectives for six-week periods. They look independently for information to understand phenomena or problems. A staff tutor leads a twice-weekly progress review within the peer group. This structure leads to an interdisciplinary, modularised curriculum that places a heavy emphasis on assessment.

As PBL is a centralised approach to curriculum, developing a PBL-related disciplinary or faculty programme requires agreement on the total educational design or master plan that sets curricular objectives. Ultimately, this means that teachers and their departments lose some independence and must co-operate in curricular planning, implementation and assessment. The faculty, usually in the form of a committee, “owns” the curriculum. Departments in a PBL-setting contribute to courses but their specialisations do not have a monopoly on them. A matrix-management system, defined by disciplines (departments) and educational activities, is used to manage all of these activities.

The PBL system began in 1975 when the institution was founded; the first faculty was the medical faculty which began with the PBL system. Seven faculties have since applied PBL, usually by adapting the system to meet the demands of the specific discipline; while there is a real organisational effort, the system is considered cost-effective.<sup>3</sup> What follows is a description of the organisational model as it was developed and used in the medical faculty.

## ***2.2. PBL and quality assurance***

A curriculum organised by a matrix requires that the faculty have a well-equipped educational management group responsible for curricular planning and implementation; this is the education committee. Staff members can apply to be part of this group and positions rotate yearly or every three years and influence the contents of a specific part of the curriculum. Staff selection based on past teaching performance. Information on staff members’ individual teaching qualities is an indicator of teaching performance and is part of an academic assessment system. Academic careers are also assessed in terms of research and teaching.

The curriculum is systematically monitored. Student evaluations weigh heavily. Students are requested to fill out questionnaires reflecting all relevant educational activities. These evaluations are returned to the responsible educational project groups which monitor curriculum implementation. Results can lead to programme changes for the following year.

In addition to student evaluations, Educational Committee review groups periodically make a thorough curriculum evaluation, thereby building quality control and educational innovation into the programme.

Faculty monitoring also uses other performance indicators mainly based on the input and output of departmental academic staff regarding the quantity and quality of teaching. The outcome is the subject of yearly review sessions held by the Faculty Educational Committee with the departments.

## **3. The affect of internal and external QA on management and decision-making processes**

### ***3.1. Faculty***

The PBL system led to the previously mentioned Faculty Educational Committee, which is a kind of faculty administration comprising academic and non-academic staff and students. The committee exercises effective control over curricular form and content, and “own” the curriculum. Curricular management is carried out by a continuous process of faculty self-assessment structured differently than what we know today. This was not done to establish a quality cycle, but to implement and

innovate the PBL-based curriculum. Indeed, the concept of “quality” in higher education was not en vogue in the Netherlands until the beginning of the *visitaties* in 1986.

When the VSNU introduced an external QA system into higher education in the Netherlands, there were no internal QA systems as yet. The Universiteit Maastricht had the advantage of already having resolved three problems, however: curricular responsibility; the tradition of programme and course evaluations; and a structure imposing departmental co-operation.

In most cases, the review committee reports acknowledged the merits of PBL. Although the UM programmes under review were occasionally inadequate, nearly all the reports praised the interdisciplinary approach, the practical skills, the assessment system, the defined curricular objectives, and independent learning, etc. Favourable reports such as these made it easy to create a favourable climate of opinion for carrying out the recommendations of the *visitatierapporten* and later for introducing a QA-system to the faculty. While the external QA system was not greeted enthusiastically in departments and faculties in Maastricht, it was generally accepted without opposition. Review committee meetings took place in an open climate. And once the results were published, the Educational Committees usually took most of the recommendations seriously and began working on follow-up.

The Law Faculty, however, fared less well than the others during its review as the committee apparently did not approve of PBL and gave an outright negative review that focused heavily on internal discussions. It left the faculty in a state of upheaval until the next review, six years later, restored its reputation. This experience demonstrated that an alternative educational system could be a step forward but also carried high risks. In addition to this general experience, the introduction of the QA system affected the management and decision-making process in other ways:

- External evaluation proved helpful for the faculty administration in taking decisions on delicate or complicated matters. Today, the pressure of future assessment remains present.
- After the first *visitatie*, quality in higher education became an explicit goal for the faculty. The five-year cycle of the external QA system was adapted by the faculties, and brought coherence and structure to the monitoring and evaluating already being done for internal purposes.

PBL also had a third effect on management and on the institution as a whole. In the first decade of the university’s life, PBL management was more or less considered to be an internal aspect of the institution. There were many national debates between pedagogues and other social scientists on the theoretical aspects of the system and national discussions among disciplines using PBL asking whether the institutions were producing doctors or lawyers with qualifications up to national criteria. The national QA-system undertook programme reviews emphasizing issues that were also covered by PBL, leading to generally favourable external reviews of faculties’ curricula. The notoriety of these reviews eventually also reflected both upon the PBL system itself and upon the institution. External QA thus provided the institution with greater recognition of its educational method. The debate on the merits of PBL extended beyond academic circles to a wider audience, and reports confirmed that the system did in fact work and could be effectively used for implementing changes.

### **3.2. Institutional impacts: recent developments**

Until recently, the national QA arena included three principal participants: the VSNU (review committee co-ordination, report publisher), the disciplines (and the faculties they constitute) and the Inspectorate for Higher Education. The Ministry of Education and the institutions monitored the proceedings at a distance. During the first ten years of QA in higher education, therefore, the effects on the institution were minimal relative to those on the faculties. While QA was a permanent agenda item when the Board of Directors of the institution conferred yearly with the Minister of Education and with the *Inspectie*, there were no consequences unless one of their faculties was blatantly inadequate. This situation is now changing somewhat so that QA becomes an immediate responsibility for the institution as well.

During the first half of the nineties, the higher education budget was seriously reduced. After some debate, the cuts were compensated for by increasing tuition fees which provoked student unions to demand guarantees of curricular quality standards in order to be able to finish courses without delays created by organisational problems.

The Ministry introduced the Quality Management Plan (*Kwaliteitsmanagementplan, KMP*) on an institutional level. Institutions must now develop a KMP that includes a QA-system for each discipline as well as for the institution as a whole, accompanied by a detailed analysis of the current situation for disciplinary QA, and a description of planned improvements. To facilitate these improvements, the Ministry of Education has created a special fund to finance institutional projects on quality improvement and educational innovation, for a period of three years.

With this new change, the UM initially found itself once again in a favourable position with respect to other institutions because the faculties already had functioning QA-systems. Designing an institutional QA-system would therefore be less concerned with persuading unconvinced staff members, departments or faculties. In order to minimise the already considerable paperwork involved therefore, the QA-system designed for the institution resembled an umbrella covering the faculties' QA-systems. This has posed a problem for the new institutional QA responsibility which supposes a degree of accountability that could lead to an obligatory, standardised cycle of evaluations, performance indicators, etc. If a standardised QA-system is imposed on the institution in the near future, how will it be achieved? The best solution would be to gradually align the various QA-systems of the faculties. If it becomes clear that this objective is not feasible within a reasonable time span, a new QA system will have to be designed to replace the faculties' QA-systems. This will probably meet with faculty resistance and seriously disturb, for the first time, the consensus of opinion on QA between institutional factions. The institution will thus be caught in the dialectics of progress.

## NOTES

1. For a detailed description of the *visitatie*'s form, content, and historical development, see D.C. Zijderveld, *External quality assessment in Dutch higher education: consultancy and watchdog roles*.
2. Most information on PBL is derived from Van der Vleuten and Wijnen (ed.), "Problem-based learning: Perspectives from the Maastricht experience" (Amsterdam, Thesis, 1990) and Van der Vleuten *et al.*, "Flexibility in learning: a case report on problem-based learning" in *International Higher Education*, 1996, pp. 17-24.
3. A.C. Nieuwenhuizen Kruseman *et al.*, "Problem-based learning at Maastricht: An assessment of cost and outcome," in *Education for Health*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 1997, pp. 179-187.