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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated the effectiveness of assessment practices of educational quality at universities in the Netherlands. The project involved analysis of questionnaire responses from 239 study programs at all 13 Netherlands universities followed by 12 case studies. The paper first provides a brief account of the theoretical background of the research project, identifying hypotheses expected to explain the degree of effectiveness of the quality assessment procedures. The study concluded that: (1) quality management in teaching has received much more attention in recent years; (2) larger amounts of resources based on assessment findings are being employed to foster improvement based on assessment findings; and (3) the Dutch quality management system has been receiving a high level of approval within the institutions. The study's efforts to explain differences in assessment utilization from the perspectives of contingency theory and political economics perspective were not successful. (Contains 26 references.) (GLR)

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Self-Evaluations and Visiting Committees

Effects of Quality Assessment in Dutch Higher Education

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Self-Evaluations and Visiting Committees

Effects of Quality Assessment in Dutch Higher Education *

1 Introduction

1.1 Quality Assessment in Dutch Higher Education

Quality management** is an issue in Dutch higher education since the 1980s. Quality assessment (or 'QA' for short) of education was introduced on the political agenda as part of the new policy of the government, with the policy paper *Higher Education: Autonomy and Quality* (1985). In exchange for a larger measure of administrative autonomy the universities collectively promised to retain and enhance their levels of quality in education. Quality assessment then appeared on a systematic and nation-wide scale in 1988, when the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) effected its new responsibility. The VSNU QA system consists of an external Visiting Committee ('VC') for each discipline or cluster of study programmes,*** operating nation-wide.

To prepare for the VC, each study programme is required to write a self-evaluation (we will conceive 'self-evaluation' and 'self-study' as synonyms). When the VC has visited all study programmes in its 'area', it writes a report, based on the self-evaluations that were its input and on the experience of the visits to the locations. These visits usually last for two intensive days, during which the VC talks to representatives of all actors involved in the study programme (including students) and at the end of which, based on the self-evaluation and the impressions of the visit, a preliminary comment and judgement about the study programme is given by the chair. This text, after being commented by the study programme, is included in the report of the visiting committee. The comments, recommendations and judgements about the individual study programmes are preceded in the report by a chapter on the general state of the art and shared problems, etc., in the discipline covered.

The self-evaluations and the report by the VC are the key documents in this quality spiral, of which the second cycle will start in 1994. In 1990 a parallel system of QA was introduced by the VSNU counterpart, the HBO Council, for the non-university sector. The VC's judgements and self-evaluations are intended, in the first place, to enhance the quality of the study programme; accountability to the government and society in general is only the second goal (Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990). This raises the question to what extent the results of the evaluations are really utilised, in other words what are the effects of the existing QA system?

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* A previous version of this paper was presented at the 15th EAIR Forum in Turku, 15–18 August,1993.

** Quality *management* is defined as: 'that aspect of the overall management function that determines and implements the quality policy [intentions and direction of the organization]'. Quality *assurance* is: 'all those planned and systematic actions necessary to provide *adequate confidence* . . .'. This usage is in accordance with ISO 8402 (emphasis added). Quality *assessment* is not defined there and will be taken to mean: a systematic examination to determine whether quality activities comply with planned arrangements and whether the 'product' (the educational process) is implemented effectively and is suitable to achieve objectives.

*** 'Study programme' will be used in this paper to designate a course *and* its organizational setting ('studierichting'). The term 'discipline' will be used here in a broad sense, meaning each area or cluster distinguished in the QA procedures.

question whether or not a visitation had taken place. As a result of this selection 35 QA experts on the study programme, faculty and institutional level were interviewed.

2 Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

2.1 A Conceptual Model of Quality Assessment

The Dutch quality assessment system may suggest that a linear relationship exists between being informed about evaluation results and the utilization of these results by individuals or groups belonging to higher education organizations. However, empirical research often shows that no use is made of evaluation results (among many others: Cooley & Bickel, 1986). The explanations given for this non-utilization can be divided into two groups of arguments. One group emphasizes the shortcomings of the evaluation or professional failings of the evaluators (Patton, 1978; Creemers, 1979; Van den Berg, 1987). The second group contends that evaluation often takes place in an ambiguous decision-making context: Who makes decisions? For which decisions are evaluation results intended? (Ross, 1980; Weiss, 1982; Scheerens, 1987) Whatever the reason, serious doubts are raised about the implied linear relationship between knowing evaluation results and utilizing them. Therefore, it seems important and useful to determine the effects of evaluations (internal and external) on higher education organizations and to look for possible explanations of whether or not follow-up activities are undertaken.

A framework for this is given by Patton *et al.* (1977), who distinguish three categories of characteristics that could be related to utilization of evaluation results, namely:

- characteristics of the organization where the evaluation takes place;
- characteristics of actors: evaluators and decision-makers of the organization;
- characteristics of the evaluation itself.

Figure 1 contains a conceptual model in which Patton's categories can be recognized and that is based on a systems theoretical approach, visualizing the relationships among evaluations of the quality of teaching and the effects of these evaluations, as well as a cluster of explanatory variables. In this figure we see that information about educational characteristics is the input for evaluation and that the output consists of evaluation results (analyses and judgements). The extent

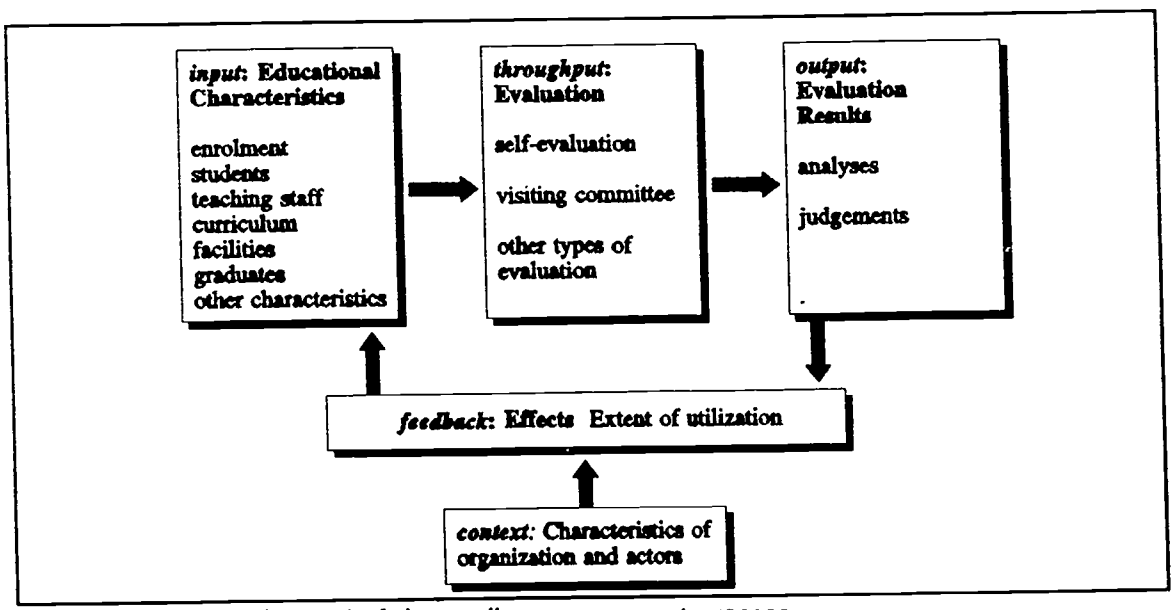

Figure 1 Conceptual model of the quality management process

to which results are being used to improve the quality of education is, for our purpose, the effect of the quality management system. The characteristics of actors, together with characteristics of the organization, are 'contextual' factors that influence the degree and way of utilization.

We define the key dependent variable, *effect*, as any way of utilization of results of the QA system. 'Utilization' then is defined as the extent to which the results of an internal or external evaluation are handled by a higher education organization. We distinguish between *no utilization*, *passive utilization* and *active utilization*. 'No utilization' means that evaluation results are neglected by a higher education organization. 'Passive utilization' refers to use of results without immediately making decisions to change (parts of) the curriculum or the organization, but, for instance, to disseminate evaluation reports within the organization, to discuss the results of the process in formal settings, or to make recommendations for future changes. 'Active utilization' is defined as taking measures on the basis of available evaluation results. One can distinguish a ranking of utilization from no utilization to passive and active utilization, but that does not imply a normative ranking: active utilization is not necessarily 'better' than passive utilization. It may well be that no active utilization is called for, e.g., when the evaluation results are completely positive. Also, passive utilization may lead to future changes that are not directly linked (in the consciousness of the organization members) to the evaluation, but that would not have occurred without it. Another point is that opportunities for change may differ. Not only active utilization is not expected when all evaluation results are positive, but also some VCs succeed better in formulating recommendations that can be used for decision-making than other VCs (Van Lieshout, 1992).

In connection with the conceptual framework a number of hypotheses are formulated. The argumentation for these hypotheses is based on the contingency approach (Child, 1984) and the political economics approach (Lieshout, 1989). These two approaches can provide us with explanations for the relationship between on the one hand characteristics of higher education organizations and the actors that operate inside these organizations and on the other hand the extent of utilization of the external (VC) and internal evaluation (self-study) results.

2.2 The Contingency Approach

The basic assumption of the contingency approach is that an effective organization is optimally adjusted to (contingent with) specific environmental circumstances. The central question of this approach is: under which conditions can an organization function most effectively? Child (1984) distinguishes a number of factors which can be conceived as explanations for the sometimes large differences between organizations. The most important contingency factors in the context of our research are: the environment, the technology, the size and the centralization of an organization. We assume that environment, technology, size and centralization are related to the extent of active utilization of the internal and external evaluation results. The hypotheses based on this approach will now be presented and substantiated. It should be noted that all hypotheses represent partial relationships, with the other factors being held constant for the time being (the *ceteris paribus* clause).

The environment of higher education organizations consists of, among others, potential students and employers. Also the financing bodies of higher education institutions, of which the national government is the most important, are part of the environment. We conceive the visiting committee as another primary environmental factor for a higher education organization. Although it goes too far to say that higher education is fully determined by its environment, it can be maintained that the external influence (labour market and visiting committee) still grows and that the goals of higher education institutions are more and more externally conditioned.

Because of the serious consequences that a negative judgement of a visiting committee can have for a study programme (student enrolments may decrease or finance may be at risk), we expect more active utilization of evaluation results on the basis of the VC report than on the basis of the self-evaluation report.

Hypothesis 1: External evaluations by visiting committees have a higher probability, compared to the internal self-evaluations, to result in active utilization of the evaluation report.

We distinguish two characteristics that refer to the structure of a higher education organization, namely the size of the study programme and the extent of centralization. The larger the size of an organization becomes, the more the need evolves to write down all kinds of previously unwritten rules and informal procedures: empirical research has confirmed that a positive relationship exists between the size of an organization and the extent of formalization (Mintzberg, 1979). The consequence of larger size may be that decision-making on the basis of evaluation results (active utilization) takes longer or even never takes place at all. It can be assumed that larger size of study programmes will lead to more formal decision-making processes, with long advice and discussion tracks and more possibilities for delaying decisions.

Hypothesis 2: The larger a study programme, the less likely it is that active utilization of evaluation results occurs.

A negative judgement of the VC might have severe consequences for the study programme. In anticipation of this potential threat the management may seek to enlarge its control over the study programme. In this way optimal conditions can be created for the external peer review, which enhances the chances for a positive judgement. Empirical research (Baldridge *et al.*, 1977) shows that a positive relationship exists between the presence of an external threat (in this case the VC) and centralization. In case of a threat the formal decision-makers will try to get more grip on the decision-making process (centralization) and use their increased power to take measures (active utilization of the evaluation results) that they conceive as necessary to cope with the external threat.

Hypothesis 3: The higher the centralization of a study programme, the more likely it is that active utilization of evaluation results occurs.

We can define technology informally as the knowledge about ways of producing (Groot, 1988). Scheerens (1987) describes the technology of higher education as 'unclear': it is uncertain how the input of the educational process (teachers, students, teaching materials) is exactly transferred into output (graduates). This uncertainty will have a negative impact on the extent of active utilization, since it is not known what difference it makes to change any single aspect. We have taken the availability of data required by the VSNU and HBO Council for the self-evaluations as indicator for the uncertainty about technology.

Hypothesis 4: The higher the availability of data required by VSNU and HBO-Council for the self-evaluations, the more likely it is that active utilization of self-evaluation results occurs.

2.3 The Political Economics Approach

Apart from the characteristics of organizations we can also identify characteristics of actors within the organization. Especially important in this context are the reputations for power of these actors. The political economics approach is based on the principle of maximization of utility. Lieshout

(1989) equalizes utility to the concept of power. This results in the proposition of an actor maximizing power, whose perceptions of the power (hence *reputations* for power) of relevant other actors, combined with their strivings for maximization of their own power, forms the input for its weighing of alternative courses of action. For our purpose, two types of actors can be distinguished in higher education institutions, namely, evaluators (the actors that carry out the internal evaluations, such as the self-study) and the decision-makers, who have to decide on how to handle the evaluation results.

The reputation for power of the evaluators is decisive for the question whether decision-makers take the self-evaluation seriously. If the recommendations are threatening for the status quo and the reputation for power of the evaluators is relatively low, the decision-makers have not much to fear from not following the advice.

Hypothesis 5: The lower the reputation for power of evaluators, the less likely it is that the results of the self-study are actively used.

Not only the reputations for power of the evaluators play an important role in determining the reaction to evaluations, but also those of the decision-makers. Powerful actors are more likely not to use recommendations that might harm the status quo and therefore their interests.

Hypothesis 6: The higher the reputation for power of decision-makers, the less likely it is that active utilization of evaluation results occurs.

A final important point is related to the overlap between evaluators and decision-makers. If the actors who perform the evaluation and the ones that have to decide on the utilization are (partly) the same, then the consequence might be a more active utilization, because this is in the interest of these evaluators-and-decision-makers.

Hypothesis 7: The more decision-makers are involved in performing the self-evaluation, the more likely it is that results of the self-evaluation are actively used.

3 Test of the Hypotheses

In this section we present the findings of the empirical tests of the seven hypotheses. To test these hypotheses we have calculated correlations between on the one hand the independent variables concerning contingency and power factors and on the other hand the dependent variables 'active utilization of the self-evaluation (SE) report' as well as 'active utilization of the VC report'. This has been done both for the university and for the non-university sector in Dutch higher education. We have used the number of measures taken in response to evaluations as an operationalization of the extent of active utilization.

As we can see in table 1 hypothesis 1 is partly corroborated, namely the proposition about the positive influence of environmental pressure (VC) on active utilization; that indeed appears to be the case for the universities. To make a comparison between the university and the non-university sector possible, active utilization is calculated as the average number of measures following the report divided by the average number of recommendations. The contingency hypotheses 2 and 3, that relate active utilization to respectively size of the study programme and centralization, are falsified. Interesting in this respect is the significant correlation we have found, concerning the

table 1 Correlations between active utilization and characteristics of the organization and actors

Hypothesis	*active utilization SE report universities*	*active utilization VC report universities*	*active utilization SE report HBO*	*active utilization VC report HBO*
1 active utilization VC report > active utilization SE report	6.3/9.6 = .66 N = 154	6.7/7.8 = .86 N = 106	7.5/13.5 = .56 N = 51	5.2/8.6 = .60 N = 31
2 size of study programme → active utilization (−)	r = .0930 N = 82 p < .406	r = .2595 N = 82 p < .019	r = .0890 N = 40 p < .585	r = −.2698 N = 21 p < .237
3 centralization → active utilization	r = .146 N = 153 p < .070	r = .0683 N = 106 p < .487	r = .2427 N = 51 p < .086	r = .1490 N = 30 p < .432
4 availability of data for SE report → active utilization SE report	r = .1509 N = 105 p < .124		r = .4063 N = 40 p < .009	
5 reputation for power of evaluators → active utilization SE report	r = .0524 N = 132 p < .551		r = −.2376 N = 44 p < .120	
6 reputation for power of decision-makers → active utilization (−)	r = .0963 N = 145 p < .249	r = .0315 N = 100 p < .756	r = −.3250 N = 50 p < .021	r = −.1425 N = 29 p < .461
7 involvement of decision-makers in SE → active utilization SE report	r = −.0732 N = 145 p < .382		r = .3375 N = 50 p < .017	

Shaded background indicates significant correlation ($p < .05$)

relationship between size of the study programme (indicated by the number of first year students) and active utilization of the VC report in universities. This correlation turned out to be positive, while a negative relation was expected. The most plausible explanation for this unexpected phenomenon seems to be that in the response to our questionnaire the sector languages and cultural studies was over-represented in the university sample. This sector contains many small study programmes and their active utilization was shown to be, on average, relatively low. This may have been caused by the low level of satisfaction with the VCs for language programmes.* So for this sector there is a positive relation between active utilization and size, which because of the over-representation of this sector may result in such a positive correlation for the entire university population. The remaining hypothesis based on the contingency approach (number 4) is partly corroborated. Only for the non-university sector a positive and significant correlation between the data available for the SE report and the extent of active utilization of the SE report could be identified. Further analysis shows that in the university sector the variation in answers tends to be less, which may explain why no significant correlation is established.

The same argument may also apply to the partial corroboration of hypotheses 6 and 7, based on the political economics approach. Empirical support for the expected negative relation between

* In the second round, this area of knowledge will be covered by many specialist VCs, instead of the two broad VCs that operated in the first round. A sense of dissatisfaction apparently has been noted in the VSNU too.

reputation for power of decision-makers and active utilization (hypothesis 6) has only been found for HBOs and then solely for the SE report. Possibly the reputation for power of decision-makers in the non-university sector is more important than in the university sector, where regulation of decision-making about educational matters is more extensive and formalized and hence the variation in reputation for power tends to be less. Furthermore, it seems plausible that reputations for power of decision-makers are more important in response to SE reports and less so in response to VC reports, due to the relatively higher reputation for power of the VC. Further analysis shows that decision-makers on the central level of the study programme are (by law) more involved in the self-evaluation in universities than in the HBO institutions. We can argue that the variation between universities and HBOs in degree of formalization of the decision-making processes can also constitute an explanation for the falsification of hypothesis 7 for the universities (concerning the expected positive relation between involvement of decision-makers in the self-study and the active utilization of the SE report). Also, we have found no support for the expectation that a higher reputation for power of evaluators has a positive impact on the active utilization of the SE report: hypothesis 5 has been falsified.

In sum, we found some support for both the contingency as well as the political economics hypotheses. However, this support consists only of four partially corroborated hypotheses, while the other three hypotheses have been falsified.

In the next three sections, we shall take a broader look at the research data, which may lead to a better insight in the way QA is embedded, and to suggestions for alternative explanations, a subject to which we shall return in the final section. But first we shall give an overview of the existing quality management activities, followed by a section about the utilization of the SE and VC reports and a section in which we will concentrate on the satisfaction with assessment procedures. The universities and the HBO institutions will be presented separately, primarily because the QA system in the HBO sector started later than in the university sector, so that the experience with it and the time to implement changes were significantly less than in the university sector.

4 Quality Management Activities

4.1 Quality Management in the Universities

Internal Evaluations and the Self-Evaluation

Out of the valid responses* to the survey, 95% of the university study programmes indicate that some kind of explicit quality activity is conducted within the organization. In most cases (64%), this includes the VSNU procedure (the self-evaluation and/or the visitation). However, 69% indicate that previous to the VSNU procedure some form of evaluation existed already, usually because it was the local tradition; special occasions, like governmental budget cuts or externally visible failure (unemployment), were not often named as reasons. These earlier evaluations were mostly concerned with the study programme as a whole (67%) or large parts (several years) of the programme (19%), so in extent they can be compared to the self-evaluations. The information resulting from previous internal evaluations could be used (partially or in full) for the VSNU self-evaluation in more than 80% of the study programmes.

Internal quality evaluations (see table 2) mostly focus upon the curriculum, or on the topics

* Valid responses, i.e., all responses minus 'not applicable' or blank, but including 'do not know'.

table 2 Subjects of quality activities

	universities %	*HBO %*
curriculum	94	98
efficiency of teaching	93	89
retention and completion rates	87	87
aims and goals of study programme	74	81
characteristics of entering students	43	69

fashionable at the time, either because of public discussions or because of the financial incentives built into the government's funding system, i.e., on efficiency of teaching and on retention rates, drop out rates and completion time. Slightly less often the aims and goals of the study programme are part of the internal quality activities. But characteristics of the students entering the programme are only mentioned in 43% of the cases. This probably reflects the freedom of choice, and the almost unlimited right to enrol that students have in the Dutch university system: study programmes or institutions have hardly any instruments to influence enrolment. It was not possible to find more attention for enrolment matters for study programmes that experience more problems in this field than others (low numbers of enrolments, deficient knowledge among entering students, especially of mathematics and sciences, etc.).

Internal quality evaluations are indeed to a high extent internal to the university study programmes in the points of view taken into account (see table 3). In (practically) all cases, student opinions and staff opinions are taken into account. Views of other stakeholders, like faculty managers, alumni, or employers all score less than 50%.

table 3 Points of view used in quality activities

opinions of	*universities %*	*HBO %*
students	100	97
academic/teaching staff	99	95
study programme or faculty/sector managers	37	42
alumni	48	75
employers/professionals	25	73

How was the self-evaluation conducted: was it something relegated to a single staff member? An individual staff member was indeed strongly or very strongly involved in 83% of the cases. However, that does not imply it was an individual's study: in practically every study programme the study programme committee ('studierichtingscommissie'),* the dean responsible for education, an *ad hoc* committee, or other actors, were strongly or very strongly involved as well. In 80% of the valid responses an *ad hoc* committee was installed: such an intensive evaluation effort apparently cannot be performed by the normal organization. Indeed, the amount of time and other resources needed to prepare the self-evaluation were often mentioned as urgent problems of the present QA system, both in the universities and in the HBO institutions. *Ad hoc* committees usually consist of members of the study programme committee and of academic staff, either as

* In the study programme committee the academic staff and students are represented equally. It is the most important advisory body for the faculty council and board regarding educational matters.

representatives of the departments ('vakgroepen'), or as individuals. If an *ad hoc* committee exists, it is (very) strongly involved in 91% of the cases.

As a rule, then, the self-evaluation can be considered to be a collective effort, so that the official endorsement by the faculty council and board —as required by the VSNU— is backed by a reasonable level of involvement of the study programme as a whole. Moreover, the self-evaluation is usually indeed done by 'self': in approximately 17% of the cases some actor from outside the study programme was involved. And those outside persons or agencies are, almost without exception, part of the larger faculty or of the university —in other words: part of the 'inner circle' of the environment.

Institutional Quality Management of Teaching

Quality management of teaching used to be a responsibility primarily of the faculty or study programme level within Dutch universities. And at that level, research was considered to be more important both for the individual's career development and for the faculty's prestige. With the introduction of the national QA procedure, the role of the institution as a whole in educational matters has obtained more emphasis; the VSNU procedure plays an important role in the central level quality activities. In most of the institutions involved in the case studies of our project, central quality management is 'reactive' rather than 'active' —which is a characterization, but not a normative judgement. A 'reactive' policy means that initiatives for quality management and enhancement are taken by the faculty or study programme, while the central actors are mostly in a supportive or stimulating role, without a central policy being formulated about the quality of teaching itself ('meta-level' policy only). This may have to do with the Continental tradition (Clark, 1983) of Dutch higher education: institutional management is not strongly developed, most competencies regarding teaching reside in the faculty or study programme and in this respect certainly the university is a 'loosely coupled' system (Birnbaum, 1988) with at least as many (management) cultures as there are faculties (Becher, 1989).

Still 'reactive', but more 'active' than most, is one university where a central committee critically reads all self-evaluations for the VSNU QA procedure and comments on their content, before they are sent to the VSNU visiting committee. Two of our seven case studies (out of thirteen universities in the Netherlands) show an 'active' central quality management of teaching, in that institution-wide goals are set. In one of the two, the completion rate is the prime indicator, supporting study programmes to take measures to raise these if necessary. In the other, a policy of raising completion rates has evolved into a more encompassing quality policy where 'studiability'* of the curricula has become the central issue.

4.2 Quality Management of Teaching in HBO Institutions

Internal Evaluations and the Self-Evaluation

Quality activities are as frequent in the HBO institutions as in the universities: 95% state to have some form of quality management activity, even though in only 21% of the cases this includes the self-evaluation for the national QA procedure coordinated by the HBO Council (the QA procedure started two years later than for the universities).

The subjects covered by the internal quality activities (see table 2) closely resemble those in the universities (curricula, efficiency, retention rates, aims are all mentioned in more than 80% of the

* 'Studiability' is a neologism introduced in a report on common problems and solutions to lower the drop out rate in Dutch higher education (Wijnen *et al.*, 1992).

cases). But the attention given to characteristics of the student intake (69%) by far exceeds the percentage for the universities (43%). This may indicate more problems with the students entering the programmes, possibly as a consequence of their more heterogeneous backgrounds, or the larger possibilities HBO programmes have for selection of their students.

Also like in the universities, the points of view represented in internal quality evaluations are predominantly internal to the study programme (see table 3): students and staff in more than 95% of the cases, but institutional managers' opinions in less than half of the cases. An interesting difference, however, exists as regards the involvement of the environment of the higher education institutions: alumni and employers play a role in approximately three quarters of the cases. Apparently, the HBO study programmes are more open to their 'clients' than university study programmes. The quality definitions used in practice in the HBO sector seem to be more consumer oriented. This difference mirrors the vocational or professional character of the HBO programmes as opposed to the more academically minded universities. As does the fact that internal quality evaluations in HBO are more often a response to changes in the external environment, especially. on the input side deficient knowledge of entering students and, on the output side changes in labour market demands.

Due to the later start of the national QA system, in the HBO sector only 21% of the study programmes had completed their self-evaluation. This means the 'empirical base' for statements related to the SE is rather small (N = 51). In general the impression emerging about the way the self-evaluations are written equals that from the university sector: the bulk of the work is done by one or a few individuals, but draft versions are fairly widely discussed, thus involving many more actors and ensuring sufficient support for the self-evaluation by the study programme as a whole. Here too the more direct links between study programmes and clients become apparent: in some cases committees representing employers or professionals are involved (albeit weakly) in the making of the self-evaluation, which does not happen in university study programmes.

Institutional Quality Management of Teaching

Most of the HBO institutions have come into existence in their present form as a result of a large-scale merger operation in the 1980s (see Goedegebuure, 1992). It is, therefore, not surprising to find that institution-wide quality management activities originated in recent years too. From the four institutions included in the case studies in this project, though, we tentatively conclude that the HBO institutions are more 'actively' involved in quality management of teaching than the central level actors of the universities. Yet also in the HBO institutions, most of the central level quality management activities could be called meta-level policy, because most of the instruments developed are to stimulate study programme level actors to give more priority to their quality management. In one of the cases included in our project, this is done through management contracts. Another interesting initiative in several HBO institutions is the organization of 'trial visits': the self-evaluation is read by a committee appointed by the institution itself (consisting of institutional staff members from other study programmes and central level quality managers, and of employers or professional representatives) prior to the official HBO Council visiting committee comes for its visit. If this practice spreads further, it might be viewed as the nucleus of an even more self-regulatory form of quality management in Dutch higher education.

5 Utilization of Self-Evaluation and VC Report

The VC report, together with the self-evaluation with its analyses, self-judgements and

recommendations, is the input for the next phase of the process at the study programme level, the utilization of the evaluation results (the feedback-part of the loop in Figure 1). In table 4 we present a first impression of the effects of the internal and external evaluations at the universities and HBOs. In the next sections we go into active, passive and no utilization of the reports.

5.1 No Utilization

One way to conclude there was no utilization has been when neither the self-evaluation report, nor the VC report, were discussed officially in any kind of meeting (passive utilization), and no measures were taken in connection to these reports (active utilization). These conditions, in conjunction, apply to four cases (two in universities and two in HBOs). This means, as far as we can observe it, that participation in the national QA system for not more than four study programmes (out of a sample of 137) is nothing but a 'ritual dance'. However, a different picture emerges if we look at no utilization of the SE and the VC report separately. No utilization of the SE report occurs in 9 out of 154 cases in universities, and in 6 out of 51 HBO study programmes. Passive as well as active utilization of the VC report have been absent in 14 out of 106 university study programmes, and in 6 out of 31 HBO cases. Although in this broader definition no utilization is more wide-spread than our first measurement indicated, there is no reason for exaggeration. Still, the vast majority of study programmes in both sectors utilize at least one of the reports either actively or passively in its organizational processes: 'ritual dancing' remains a rarity.

5.2 Passive Utilization

As we can see in table 4 the passive utilization of both reports (indicated by the average number of actors discussing the reports: the maximum number of actors is seven) is higher for the universities than for the HBO institutions. In both sectors the SE rapport leads to more formal discussion than the VC report. However, further analysis of our survey data shows that the VC report is more discussed by the faculty board (and its equivalent in the non-university sector) than the SE report, which is consistent with formal decision-making rules. From the fact that SE reports tend to be disseminated rather widely throughout the faculty we can deduce the existence of a collective interest in the self-evaluation. This does not imply that usually all academic staff members and students receive copies of the report, but they all can get access to the information if they want.

In universities the faculty boards, faculty councils, study programme committees and departments discussed both reports in more than 50% of the cases. The reports were also discussed in 50% or more of the cases by student representatives, but in only 15% (for the VC report) and 36% (for the SE report) by individual staff members. In contrast with these findings the passive

table 4 The extent of utilization of internal and external evaluation results

	SE report universities	VC report universities	SE report HBO	VC report HBO
average number of actors discussing reports	3.8	3.1	3.4	2.7
average number of recommendations	9.6	7.8	13.5	8.6
average number of measures following report	6.3	6.7	7.5	5.2
percentage of drastic measures	27%	19%	26%	18%

utilization by the equivalent of the faculty council in the HBO sector tends to be lower, but the discussion of the reports by teachers higher (50% or more).

From our interviews we formed the impression that on the institutional level the evaluation results are hardly utilized. This is not surprising, since the responsibility for the content of the SE report and the follow up of both the internal and external evaluation rests exclusively with the faculties. However, in a few cases the faculties were assisted by the institutional level in preparing the self-evaluation, but only at their request. Furthermore, although passive utilization (formal discussion) of the SE report on the institutional level does in general not occur, the VC reports were in most cases discussed on the central level (by the Committee of Deans). This passive utilization may also include discussion with the faculty and/or the study programme about the follow up, especially when the judgements of the VC were rather negative.

5.3 Active Utilization

Ultimately, one of the aims of evaluation is improvement of the quality of the study programme. As a rule, the evaluation reports show that something could be improved: out of the 31 categories presented, the average university study programme that has written a SE report indicates that on 9.6 points (HBOs: 13.5) some recommendation(s) was (were) made in the self-evaluation report, and on 7.8 (HBOs: 8.6) in the VC report (see table 4). In table 5 the percentage of study programmes that have taken measures on a certain subject following the SE and VC recommendations are confronted with the percentage of study programmes that received recommendations on that subject. From table 5 it can be noticed that in both universities and HBOs the most 'popular' subjects in SE and VC reports to make recommendations about relate to the content and aims of the curriculum (including study progress). In universities considerable less advices are being given regarding the qualifications of teachers and graduates. In the HBO sector, on the contrary, qualifications of teachers and graduates get much more attention, especially in the self-evaluation. Here facilities (computers, libraries, etc.) are the less 'popular' subject for recommendation.

It is clear from table 4 that the average number of recommendations (both for the SE and the VC report) is lower for the universities than for the HBO sector. The figures concerning the average number of measures following the reports are more diversified. Following the SE report more measures are taken in HBO institutions (7.5 vs. 6.3), while in response to the VC report the average number of measures is higher in universities (6.7 vs. 5.2). However, this comparison between the university and non-university sector is not quite fair: for comparing the active utilization within the

table 5 Active utilization per subject in QA reports (%)

	universities		*HBO institutions*	
	measures/ recommen-dations SE report	*measures/ recommen-dations VC report*	*measures/ recommen-dations SE report*	*measures/ recommen-dations VC report*
student enrolment	20/46	11/29	20/57	10/32
propaedeutic programme	10/60	19/74	6/71	23/52
master's/bachelor's programme	13/67	23/81	24/78	26/74
teachers	8/28	7/30	20/53	10/35
facilities	14/53	12/43	14/45	3/29
graduates	10/39	14/37	24/55	13/45

two sectors it seems appropriate to take the average number of recommendations into account. The active utilization, corrected for the average number of recommendations, can be seen in table 1 (hypothesis 1). Then a different picture emerges: the active utilization in both sectors is higher for the VC than for the SE report (though the difference is non-significant for the HBO sector).

But the important question, determining the actual effects, must be: are measures taken as a consequence of the evaluation process? There certainly is not a one-to-one ('linear') relationship between recommendations and measures. Indeed, the number of times that recommendations on a certain subject in the reports correspond directly with measures on the same subject are very low, as we can also see in table 5.

Furthermore, it can be noticed that in universities, following both the SE as the VC report, the numbers of measures taken regarding teachers are relatively low. This may imply that the professional autonomy of university teachers is too large to impose changes in their way of teaching, to stimulate staff development programmes, etc.

Especially interesting are, of course, explanations of the observed non-linear relationship between recommendations and following measures, or in other words, the low degree of active utilization. Apart from the explanations given by the hypotheses, of which the pressure of the VC and partially (only for HBOS) the availability of data for self-evaluation, the power reputation of decision-makers and their involvement in the self-evaluation have proven to be significant, we were also confronted with possible explanations during our case studies. From analysis of SE and VC recommendations it became clear that not often an actor responsible for the follow up is mentioned. This can lead to a situation in which no one feels responsible for follow up actions and consequently no active utilization occurs. A period of time in which measures should be taken is only mentioned in a small number of recommendations. The omission of a time frame can cause endless postponement of active utilization.

In our interviews with QA experts the following explanations for not transforming the recommendations into actions emerged:

- the decision-makers do not agree with the content of the recommendations;
- the advice is still being discussed;
- the recommendations are inconsistent with the policy of the Ministry of Education and Science;
- the financial means necessary for realizing the recommendations are insufficient;
- the subjects of recommendation already had the attention of the study programme and additional actions are perceived as unnecessary.

Another possible explanation for not or hardly utilizing evaluation results can be derived by taking differences in values, norms and traditions between disciplines into account. These differences in disciplinary cultures can be quite substantial (see, e.g., Becher, 1989) and may influence the extent of utilization. In some disciplines there may exist a more positive attitude towards evaluation or the utilization of evaluation results than in other disciplines. Analysis of variance of our survey data indicate empirical support for this assumed relation between disciplinary cultures and the extent of utilization. Further research is necessary if we want to go more into detail about the exact nature and direction of this relation.

The measures taken are, as a rule, not very drastic (see table 4). On the contrary, in both sectors and both following the self-evaluation and the VC report, the median class of answers is 'not far-reaching' (the lowest of the five possibilities for answering) for all subjects except the master's (HBO: bachelor's) and propaedeutic programme. The subjects 'student enrolment', 'graduates' and 'teachers' have the lowest averages for drastic measures. The percentages of drastic measures (average for all categories in a study programme four or more out of five) are higher, both in universities and in HBO institutions, for measures taken following the SE report. This seems logical

if we assume that as a rule drastic measures are already taken in anticipation of the visitation.

A last point we want to make in this section relates to active utilization on the institutional level. As has been said before, the utilization of the evaluation reports is the responsibility of the faculties and study programmes. Therefore, it may not seem surprising that on the institutional level hardly any actions are being taken as a result of the evaluations. Notwithstanding this, we noted in our interviews that some universities and HBOs have introduced or are developing a sort of control-system. The aim of such a control-system is that the institutional level gets more insight into the handling of the VC report by the faculties. This may imply that the faculty informs the Board of the institution (e.g., in the annual report on education) about the measures that are being taken in response to the VC reports and also discusses the follow up in regular meetings with the Board.

6 Satisfaction with the QA System

6.1 Overall Satisfaction

Included in our questionnaire was also a question about the appreciation by the study programme about the different types of evaluations. On a scale from 1 tot 10 (the usual rating scale in Dutch education: 1 being the minimum and 10 the maximum) the respondents could give their judgement about the internal quality management, the visitation and the self-evaluation. Respondents were also asked to motivate their judgement. The marks that the respondents gave, were taken as an indicator for the degree of satisfaction with the elements of the QA system. This can be considered both as a side effect of the present round of the VSNU and HBO Council systems and as a first indication for the willingness of the study programmes to co-operate in the second round of evaluations. Apparently, the median class of answers being seven, the study programmes are fairly satisfied with the existing QA system(see table 6). Of course, this does not mean that no changes are wished for or that there are no variations within the populations (between sectors and disciplines) or concerning the different elements of QA. At this place we want to point at the differences between the total response and the so called 'visited' response (the study programmes that were visited at the time of our survey or that were in the process of visitation, viz., that had finished their self-evaluation). It can be noted from table 6 that, while in universities the scores for the total and the 'visited' response hardly differ, in the HBO sector the 'visited' study programmes are more satisfied about QA than the total response. However, in comparing these averages we must be careful, because the non-university response is considerably lower than the response of universities. In the next sections we will go more into detail about the satisfaction with the internal quality

table 6 Satisfaction of respondents with different types of evaluation

	universities (total response)	*universities ('visited'* response)*	*HBO (total response)*	*HBO ('visited'* response)*
internal quality management	7.2 (N = 198)	7.2 (N = 136)	7.0 (N = 139)	7.4 (N = 49)
self-evaluation	7.1 (N = 168)	7.2 (N = 139)	7.0 (N = 100)	7.3 (N = 49)
visitation	6.4 (N = 156)	6.5 (N = 129)	6.9 (N = 85)	7.3 (N = 40)

* Under 'visited' we include the study programmes that were visited at the time of our survey or that were in the process of visitation, viz. that had finished their self-evaluation

management, the self-evaluation and the visitation.

6.2 Satisfaction with Internal Quality Management

There is little difference in satisfaction about the internal quality management between the two sectors: HBOs are slightly more satisfied than universities ('visited response'). Further analysis (correlations) shows that study programmes are more satisfied if they use judgements of the faculty board and of students in their internal evaluations (both sectors) and if they take characteristics of student enrolment into account (only universities). For the HBO sector we found a positive and significant ($p < .05$) correlation between satisfaction and the utilization of judgements of alumni.

In their motivations respondents in both sectors indicated that regular evaluations and feedback to teachers, regular meetings between teachers and departments, participation of students, a small size of the study programme, utilization of information systems, modularization of courses, a critical self-evaluation and the external pressure of the visitation, contributed to a positive attitude towards the internal quality management. Obstacles for internal evaluations are also mentioned: financial problems, shortages of teachers and the fact that evaluations take a lot of time. A few respondents from HBO institutions point at the risk that evaluations are perceived as a charge on the autonomy of teachers and have doubts about the appropriation of quantitative evaluation methods for small study programmes. From the comments of respondents we got the impression that many study programmes in the non-university sector are still in the starting phase of quality management.

6.3 Satisfaction with the Self-Evaluation

The satisfaction with self-evaluation, as for internal quality management, hardly differs between universities and HBO institutions. Analysis of causal relations between satisfaction with SE and other variables, derived from the survey, show different types of significant correlations between the two sectors. University study programmes tend to be more positive towards SE if they already have a tradition of evaluation and if the SE report has been formally discussed by the faculty board and council. Study programmes in the non-university sector are more satisfied if in the SE report results of previous evaluations have been used, the report has been discussed by the teachers and the students committee, the number of recommendations in the report is higher and if more measures have been taken following recommendations on student enrolment and facilities.

Positive judgements are motivated by pointing out that the self-evaluation increases the awareness of the importance of quality management, enables the study programme to get a thorough overview of 'the state of the art' concerning educational matters and enhances the chance on a critical reflection of the educational process. Negative conclusions in the report seem to be accepted better if teachers are more involved and have more influence on the follow up. Many respondents who are negative about the self-evaluation motivate this by pointing at the heavy burden that the making of the SE report imposes on the study programme. Also the fact that some reports are made by one or just a few people and consequently lack the necessary support of larger groups within the faculty is a reason for dissatisfaction. Some respondents admit that the external pressure of the VC may stimulate the completion of the self-evaluation, but at the same time entails the risk that the SE relates too much to the framework and references of the VC, thereby loosing the importance of the self-evaluation as an instrument for the internal quality management out of sight. Furthermore, the utilization of data of institutional information systems is sometimes problematic as well as support from the central level in constructing the self-evaluation.

Not surprisingly then, the QA experts that were questioned in the interviews propose changes for the second round that are aimed at a larger involvement of teachers in writing the report, the

explication of the preferences of the VC and more attention for the internal function of the SE as an instrument for internal quality management.

6.4 Satisfaction with the Visitation

The most significant deviation in table 6 that draws our attention is the relatively low appreciation of the visitation in universities, both compared to the satisfaction with the other elements of QA as compared to the higher scores for the visitation in the non-university sector. An analysis of the scores per discipline shows that this is partially caused by the negative judgement (5.6) of the VC in the university discipline languages and cultural studies. In this discipline many study programmes were dissatisfied about the broad range of study programmes clustered under a few visiting committees. From further analysis several statistically significant correlations between satisfaction and other variables emerged. Study programmes of both sectors have a more positive attitude towards the VC if a tradition of evaluation exists. In universities a smaller size of the study programme, discussion of the VC report by the faculty council and the study programme committee, more recommendations about graduates and following drastic measures on this subject, contributed to higher satisfaction. Surprisingly, the only correlations that could be found in the non-university sector relate to a lower number of recommendations concerning facilities and a lower number of total measures taken following the VC report. It seems that HBOs react more negatively to measures taken following the VC report. However, because of the low response in the non-university sector we have to be cautious with this conclusion.

As motivations for a positive attitude towards the visitation the importance of assessments by external experts, the stimulation of a 'quality culture' and the fact that recommendations of the VC often support desirable changes, are mentioned. Factors that contribute to a negative attitude are that recommendations are often not very precise, reports are sometimes inconsistent, comparisons of not comparable study programmes are being made, visitations sometimes coincide with reorganizations or holidays, the negative influence that educational political views of the VC can have an independent assessment and the belief that if the self-evaluation is carried out properly, the VC has little more to add.

All experts, with one exception, that were questioned in the interviews held the opinion that the present QA system should be maintained. This does not mean that changes are not desirable: most pleas were made for a less intensive procedure; the procedures take too much time now. Furthermore, the preferences of the VC should be more explicated, recommendations must be formulated more precisely and in the second round more attention should be given to the follow up. University QA experts like to see a less prominent role for retired professors as members of the VC and a more important role for foreign experts. Several respondents from the HBO sector point at the importance of having more educational scientists in the committee.

7 Conclusions

Our first, and main, conclusion is that quality management of teaching is an issue that has obtained much more attention than before in Dutch higher education. In a previous research project of the university sector of Dutch higher education, before the policy changes took effect, one of the present authors found that internal quality management was a rare thing (Weusthof, 1989). The outcomes of that project suggest that self-evaluations mostly took place at the lower levels of universities (teacher evaluation, course unit evaluation) and that the results of these evaluations were hardly used in a structured way in faculty decision-making and planning processes. Now, to

the contrary, many university and non-university study programmes or faculties have special committees or specially appointed staff members for quality management of education, and many more have written a self-evaluation: quality of education certainly has gained an important place on the agenda of decision-makers. Another remarkable difference between this study and the earlier research project concerns the content of the self-evaluation. Seemingly, as a consequence of the introduction of the VSNU and HBO Council QA systems not only characteristics of the educational process (e.g., didactic qualities of teachers) have become an object of evaluation, as proved to be the case in the previous research project, but also input and output characteristics of education (for example, giving information to potential students, acquiring data about labour market perspectives of graduates). In general we can say that a 'quality culture' may be putting out its roots in the universities and HBO institutions. Involvement of the central level actors of higher education institutions is less marked, which is in accordance with the procedures set up by the VSNU and the HBO Council, for these are focused at the study programme level. But other factors, often stemming from the Continental mode of governance, can be mentioned here as well; they could explain the predominant 'meta-level' policy approach at the institutional level (stimulating study programmes to take their quality management seriously, rather than formulating an institution-wide quality of teaching policy).

Second, quality is not only on the agenda, but also something is done about it: measures are taken in connection with the self-evaluations and the VC reports. However, we cannot say that the large amount of resources invested immediately leads to an equally large improvement of the quality of education: measures are not taken in response to every recommendation, nor are the measures taken drastic. This is not meant as a criticism of the present system of quality assessment: the effects of a 'quality culture' cannot and should not be expected to be immediate and large. Quality of education, however important, is only one of a multitude of issues in the institutions for higher education; it will take time to grow above the level of the roots it is putting out now; less far-reaching measures may have large effects in future years. Furthermore, taking measures does not *necessarily* lead to improvement of education. The relation between taking measures and observing improvement is obscure. This originates in the complexity of the education process. There are many factors in this process that are very difficult to control. More important still is the lack of knowledge about cause and effect relationships in education; taking measures seems to be a matter of trial and error and of imitating behaviour.

Third, the level of satisfaction about the implementation of the Dutch quality management system within the institutions is fairly high. This is quite remarkable taking into account that higher education organizations are often described as relatively autonomous organizations with little inclination to appreciate outside scrutiny. From this point of view the implementation of the present quality management system can be seen as a break-in into the ivory tower. Considering the relatively high level of satisfaction, the higher education institutions certainly do not shut the doors in the face of this attempt to break in. The details of the process may be important in this smooth introduction, e.g., ownership and coordination by the institutions themselves, and a rather indirect link with (financial) sanctions (see on this matter also: Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993). The level of satisfaction is also remarkable in view of the frequent remarks about how heavy a burden it is to write a self-evaluation. From our interviews it seems doubtful whether the same enthusiasm can be mobilized again for the second round of visits.

Finally, we have to conclude that our effort to explain differences in utilization from a contingency theory perspective and from a political economics perspective have largely failed. Even though no 'linear' processes of self-evaluation, visitation, recommendations and measures were expected, it proved to be more difficult than envisioned to capture in a survey the intricate

decision-making processes within the institutions and study programmes, in which implementation (and anticipation!) of the QA process is mingled with other national and local policy initiatives, changes in the funding formulas for institutions and individual students and changes in labour market demands and opportunities.

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