The Last Word

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External quality control in communication science: The Dutch experience

ABSTRACT

In this article, the author gives an overview of how quality control is done in Communication Science at Dutch and Flemish universities. He bases his overview on his experience as a member of the Dutch/Flemish External Quality Control Commission during 1998/99. The article focuses briefly on the question "why quality control?", a definition of quality control, the process of quality control, challenges in and threats to Communication Science, and on-site visits to departments. He finally provides the Dutch checklist (reworked and translated) used by external quality control commissions for the evaluation of university teaching.

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INTRODUCTION

In terms of South Africa's new Higher Education Act (1997) and the South African Qualifications Authority Act (1995), tertiary education will in the future be subjected to external monitoring and auditing, in short, to quality control. The process for this started with the setting-up of National Standards Bodies (NSBs) in twelve organising fields, including NSB04 for Communication Studies and Languages, within these fields of Standards Generating Bodies (SGBs) and eventually Education and Training Quality Assurance Bodies (ETQAs) for the different fields.

The purpose of this paper is not to explain how these SAQA bodies are and will be operating. Suffice it to say that South Africa will have a system of quality control similar to that in other parts of the world, and that academics will have to account for the outcomes they teach as well as how and with what. The purpose of this paper is rather to share the author's experience of quality control in the Netherlands with the readers.

Although the South African system will differ from that in the Netherlands and other parts of the world, the purpose of this article is to give you some idea of what quality control can involve. If this paper, ultimately succeeds only in making readers aware of the fact that they are not the only academics in the world subjected to what they often experience as unnecessary interference by a "monster" called SAQA, created by the government, then it would have achieved its goal.

Quality control is a new reality faced by academics almost all over the world. Should one wish to do so, it could be criticised and numerous questions could be asked about the need for and value of, quality control. It can be argued that one of the greatest problems of our time is that a university is no longer perceived as a preserver of "truth". To the contrary, it is increasingly seen as just another instrument of national development, national competitiveness, economic growth and wealth generation. Although the author may agree with this kind of criticism, such criticism is not the purpose of this paper.

During 1998/99, the author had the opportunity to be a member of a commission for external quality control in Communication Science at Dutch and Flemish universities. The seven person commission, under the chairmanship of emeritus professor of the University of Amsterdam, Prof Denis McQuail, evaluated the programmes and teaching of six departments of communication, namely those at the University of Amsterdam, the Catholic University of Nijmegen, the University of Twente, the Catholic University of Leuven, the University of Gent and the Free University of Brussels.

External quality control in tertiary education has been standard and institutionalised practice for the past ten years at Dutch universities, and since 1998, at Flemish universities. Two forms of external quality control are undertaken for each discipline every five years, namely quality control over learning programmes and teaching, and research quality control. Research quality control involves the evaluation of each lecturer's research output which, is done separately and by a different commission.

WHY QUALITY CONTROL?

Since the seventies, universities have been experiencing an era of so-called mass education. Numerous factors, such as industrialisation, urbanisation, the democratisation of education and educational systems, the demands of industry and labour, and globalisation, have contributed to this. A result of mass education is that to survive tertiary education, institutions must increasingly embrace a philosophy in which the marketplace is central and in which they are increasingly expected to become customer-focused business enterprises. There has been a move from:

- the 'canon' of learning to a commodification of knowledge;
- the question "Is it true?" to "What use is it?", "Is it saleable?", "Is it efficient?";
- education to training for employment; and
- academic curricula to market-driven curricula.

Mass education has placed:

- growing pressures on educational budgets;
- emphasis on student numbers;
- growing competition between institutions of higher education;
- growing automatisation; and
- growing demands on institutions of higher education to provide "relevant" education and training for the labour market.

Within universities, these and other factors have contributed to concerns about the maintenance of academic standards, the quality of what tertiary institutions teach and research, and the quality of students entering the labour market. From the part of the government and industry, there has been a growing need to ensure that outcomes are achieved.

DEFINING QUALITY CONTROL

Measuring quality in tertiary education is difficult. Given the:

- diversity of disciplines, each with their own character and defined field and traditions of inquiry;
- the complexity of the nature of academic inquiry; as well as
- the need for academic freedom,

it is difficult to:

- define academic quality,
- set norms for academic quality,
- develop measurement criteria, and
- execute such measurement.

However, despite these difficulties, the Dutch universities and tecknikons ("hogescholen") decided to set up a structure and framework for quality control, overseen and administered by the Association of Co-operating Dutch Universities (Vereniging voor Samewerkende Nederlandstalige Universiteite (VSNU)) in the Netherlands, and the Flemish Inter-university Council (Vlaamse Inter-universitêre Raad (VL.I.R.)) in Flanders. They agreed that five main questions are important and can be asked, regardless of the discipline, for each programme offered by a tertiary institution:

- How relevant is a programme, both from an academic perspective and in terms of societal needs?
- What are the objectives and outcomes of a programme?
- Can the contents of, and the teaching methods applied in, a programme achieve the programme's objectives and outcomes?
- What has the student acquired in terms of
  - knowledge,
  - skills, and
  - attitudes?
- How can this knowledge as well as these skills and attitudes contribute to the needs of industry and society?

These five questions should be answered from the perspectives of:

- the department and the lecturers offering a programme,
- the student's expectations,
- the needs of employers, and

- the government as (in many cases) the main sponsor of tertiary education.

It was furthermore accepted that academic quality is influenced and determined by various factors, the following of which are (to a certain extent) measurable:

- quality of the lecturer,
- contents and level of a programme,
- teaching process,
- teaching management, and
- internal quality control.

In the first place quality depends on the lecturers and the ways in which they transfer knowledge. Although this is difficult to measure, a number of instruments can at least provide. Such intruments are:

- regular and standardised evaluations of lecturers by students;
- evaluation of the lecturers' teaching material: study notes, guides, readers, tutorial letters, text books;
- evaluation of the lecturers' academic involvement and commitment in the form of published research output, participation in conferences, seminars and workshops; and
- evaluation of the lecturers' teaching competencies and willingness to participate in programmes to improve their teaching competencies.

Secondly, academic quality is influenced and determined by the contents and level of a programme. In this regard, the following can be investigated:

- the philosophy, motivation and rationale behind a programme (why has a department decided on a specific programme?);
- the objectives and outcomes of a programme;
- the coherence of and within a programme ;
- whether a programme includes fundamental education and training; and
- whether electives are relevant to a programme's objectives and outcomes.

In terms of the level of a programme, the following can, for example, be evaluated:

- whether a programme and its constituents (modules/sections) include the latest developments in a field;
- the standard and level of text books;
- the standard of student's work (research projects/ practical projects/ assignments); and

- the level, standard and nature of examination papers and scripts.

Thirdly, academic quality is influenced and determined by the teaching process itself. This includes:

- the use of different teaching forms, for instance, the relation between lectures, workshops and seminars;
- teaching methods, including ways in which students are assisted in how they should learn and guide themselves towards self-study;
- timetables, including whether it is possible for a student to complete a programme within the set time;
- the progressive development of undergraduate studies leading to postgraduate studies; and
- forms of evaluation, testing and examination.

Fourthly, academic quality is influenced and determined by teaching management. This includes factors such as:

- staff numbers and staff/student ratio;
- staff relations;
- workload;
- the relation between teaching and research;
- facilities; and
- financing.

Finally, and apart from external quality control, the extent and frequency of internal quality control are essential for the maintenance of academic quality. This involves:

- regular internal evaluations of objectives, outcomes, and requirements;
- monitoring student progress and failure;
- monitoring alumni;
- monitoring the job market;
- self-analysis and peer reviews; and
- the setting-up of mechanisms to ensure that the results of these evaluations and monitors are implemented.

Against this background, the VSNU developed a checklist to be used by teaching departments in compiling their internal evaluation and/or quality control reports, and by the external quality control commissions. The checklist (cf Appendix 1) includes 86 topics and questions that must be reported on in detail by the departments, investigated by the external commissions and reported on by the commissions in their final published

report. The checklist is used by the commissions to rate each department on a scale of:

—	=	completely unacceptable
-	=	unacceptable
v	=	acceptable
+	=	good to excellent

The main categories of the checklist allow for a detailed investigation of:

- the objectives and outcomes of a programme: how the objectives are translated into outcomes;
- contents of the programme;
- the progressive development within a programme;
- the quality of teaching and teaching methods;
- the quality and level of assessing student work;
- the programme's possibilities for students to acquire research, computing, language and presentation skills;
- the level and quality of student research projects/dissertations and the supervision provided by lecturers;
- the learnability of a programme;
- the increase or decline of student numbers and the reasons for this;
- the quality of study information provided to students prior to registration and learning assistance during their period of study;
- the duration of study;
- the department's facilities, including library, computer, lecture hall and teaching equipment facilities;
- the employment of alumni;
- the qualifications, teaching and research experience of lecturers as well as the provision of training for lecturers in teaching methods;
- the department's international links and policy for internationalisation;
- the department's system and operationalisation of internal quality control; and
- the department's response to the recommendations of the previous external evaluation.

THE PROCESS OF QUALITY CONTROL

The process of quality control begins with departments being notified by the VSNU and the VLUR , almost a year in advance, that they will be evaluated by an external commission and that they must prepare a self-evaluation report according to the guidelines of the VSNU/VLIR, to be handed in at the VSNU/VLIR by a given deadline. They are requested to nominate possible external academics to serve on the commission, which is appointed by the VSNU/VLIR.

Internal reports

The internal reports are distributed to the individual members of the commission for their individual evaluation according to the guidelines (checklist) of the VSNU/VLIR, including a sample of dissertations, examination papers and scripts, lists of prescribed texts and detailed syllabi. At the first meeting of the commission, the members' individual reports are discussed, a frame of reference is drawn up and agendas for meetings with the departments are finalised.

Communication science: frame of reference

In the case of communication science the, Commission agreed to concentrate, apart from the official checklist, on:

- What can, should and may be expected from a student who has majored in Communication Science? Here the Commission distinguished between knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Knowledge

At least a knowledge of, and insight in:

- the basic concepts and theories of mass, public, organisational and interpersonal communication;
- theoretical developments within Communication Science;
- the state of the scientific discourse in Communication Science;
- the most important media types and systems;
- the important phases (production, distribution and use) and the political, social and cultural functions and modalities of communication;
- the methods and techniques of social science research as applied in communication science; and
- an in-depth knowledge of the theories and research techniques and methods in at least one specialisation area in Communication Science

Skills

- the ability to find and work with research sources related to specific communication research questions and problems;
- the ability to apply research methods and techniques;
- the ability to formulate research questions and to design research proposals;
- the ability to report research findings in writing and in the form of public

presentations;
- communication management skills: media management, marketing and corporate communication management;
- the design and evaluation of communication plans for profit and non-profit organisations;
- the ability to work within teams; and
- computer, writing and presentation skills.

Attitudes

- the ability to reflect critically on communication issues;
- scientific integrity;
- the ability to reflect critically on the importance and social relevance of communication including ethical and normative aspects; and
- a professional attitude.

Furthermore, as part of the minimum requirements, the Commission looked specifically for:

- a progressive development in the syllabi, including an overview of the field of Communication Science and an overview of specialisation options in the 1st and 2nd years of study;
- a clear indication of the relevance and relatedness of fundamental and elective modules in a Communication Science curriculum, and whether the students are informed about the relevance and relatedness of fundamentals and electives;
- the application of different teaching forms, namely a combination of lectures, workshops, skills training, practicals, and self-study;
- how students are guided towards independent study, or learned how to study;
- ☐ that at the 3rd and 4th levels there should be the opportunity of specialisation in one or two specialisation areas; and
- ☐ whether students are required to finalise their undergraduate study with a research project.

In addition to these minimum requirements, the Commission felt strongly about innovativeness in syllabi. With innovativeness, the Commission emphasised specifically, that regardless of the specialisation area, be it organisational communication or mass communication, syllabi should include the latest developments in information and communication technology and their impact on communication, the job market, the questions asked in Communication Science and the future of the discipline.

The Commission's point of departure was that in the past 50 years Communication

Science has established itself as a sound academic discipline with a growing body of theory,   models and research, developed mainly out of and in response to, specific societal needs. Communication Science is institutionalised as an independent discipline at most of the established universities. It is a popular choice among students, with increasing student numbers almost all over the world. Further proof of the vitality of the discipline is   the growing number of publishers specialising in Communication Science, as well as an increase in the number of specialised academic journals and academic associations.

The future of Communication Science, will, however, depend on how the discipline will respond to an information society with new media in a new economy. This is a society creating a new public communication culture in which communication within organisations, between organisations, between producers and consumers, between citizens and governments, and   between different cultures, is undergoing changes that confront the discipline with new dimensions, new problems and new challenges. The direct effect of this is a demand on Communication Science to provide education and training that adjust to the needs of a changing labour market.

In other words, whether or not the discipline is adjusting to a new communication culture and to the demands of the industry, the Commission identified the following challenges and threats:

● **The development of information and communication technologies**

How well, and how rapidly do departments respond to the development of information and communication technology as well as the new questions and required skills introduced by these developments if they do not address these aspects, departments run the risk of becoming irrelevant.

● **The demands of the communication industry**

Closely related to the development of ICT are the demands of the industry. Although, an academic discipline should not be dictated by the industry, and although its focus should remain on theory and research, critical questions can be asked about the relevance of Communication Science's theories and research to the industry. Do the outcomes of a programme in Communication Science provide students with the theoretical and methodological skills to do relevant research for the industry? Communication Science tends to be so preoccupied with esoteric theory and research that the skills needed to practise a career in the communication industry, including research skills, are neglected.

● **Specialisation leading to a fragmentation of the subject field**

An almost automatic response to the challenges of a new communication culture is to specialise in one or two fields of Communication Science. The Commission argued that specialisation at too early a stage may eventually disadvantage the student and lead to a fragmentation of the discipline. Many other disciplines may claim to teach some aspect of communication and they areincreasingly doing so. Sociology can argue that the information society remains a society and thus the domain of sociological enquiry. Economics can claim that the new economy created through globalisation and its accompanying information technologies can be understood only against the background of classical economy. Similarly, Linguists can argue that whatever the form of communication, language and linguistic skills remain central, and that communication is thus the domain of language studies. However, Communication Science, being interdisciplinary in nature, remains the only discipline with the aim of providing a fundamental understanding and explanation of all forms of human communication, and to do so from an integral vision of the role of communication in society and among people. Specialising in only one aspect or form of communication at too early a stage in a student's training may have short-term advantages, but may eventually deprive the student from a coherent view of communication. It is like training a psychologist only in psychopathology without a background in development psychology or social psychology. Thus, the question is, to what extent does an undergraduate programme provide a student with a coherent understanding of the discipline, and does it, within a coherent framework, provide the basis for specialisation?

As far as fragmentation of the discipline is concerned, a real threat is the tendency of other disciplines to claim the right of teaching aspects of Communication Science. Although one may not and cannot deny them the right to do so, and although one cannot deny that other disciplines, such as Linguistics, may have the research knowledge and skills to do so, the question remains whether this is done against the background of the said coherent knowledge and understanding of the body of knowledge in the field of Communication Science, or simply as an emergency measure to survive in terms of student numbers. A question that the Commission thus investigated was to what extent departments face up to this threat. Do they ignore it or are there agreements in terms of co-operation to the benefit of students and the development of Communication Science?

On site visits to departments

To return to the process of quality control. Against the background of the pre-evaluation of the internal reports, a frame of reference and the minimum requirements set by the

Commission, the on-site visits of three days per department spread over a period of four months were initiated. These visits are planned meticulously by the VSNU/VLIR and involve structured interviews conducted in an almost court-like fashion with different groups of junior and senior lecturing staff, professors, of junior and senior students, doctoral students, alumni, departmental management committees, faculty management, and the inspection of facilities. During the last session of a visit to a department the Commission gives a preliminary oral report, using the official checklist as a basic foundation and against the background of the Commission's findings during the visit. This session is open to the public, to students, to staff, and to the media, and it is attended by the dean of the faculty as well as the principal or a representative of university management.

A few weeks after the visit, the oral report is followed by a first draft written report to which the department can respond, followed by a second draft report, and finally a published report handed to the presidents of the VSNU/VLIR and eventually to the ministries of education. The Commission's visit to departments and their report are followed up by a visit from the ministry to the departments, during which the recommendations of the Commission are discussed with the departments. Should it become evident that a department does not pay attention to the shortcomings in their programmes and training, has not formulated plans to
overcome shortcomings, or has not paid attention to the recommendations of a previous external evaluation, the subsidy can be withdrawn or a department can be closed down.

CONCLUSION

The above is a brief, rather than detailed or an evaluative overview of quality control in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, I trust that it has provided some idea of what it can involve. It is a lengthy, intense process spread over a period of almost two years, beginning with the notification to departments and ending with follow-up visits by die ministries of education.
It places heavy demands on departments who have to report in detail on every aspect of their work to be scrutinised by external evaluators.

In South Africa, the functions of ETQAs (Education and Training Quality Assurance Bodies)
will be to:

- promote quality among constituent providers;
- accredit constituent providers for specific standards or qualifications registered with the NQF;

- evaluate assessment and facilitation of moderation among constituent providers;
- moderate across ETQAs; and
- monitor provision by constituent providers, etc.

Exactly how this will be done is not yet known. However, it seems as if ETQAs will be formed from constituencies such as professional and academic associations. It is thus in the interest of communication scientists and academics to ensure the future of a strong subject-related association.

APPENDIX 1: CHECKLIST

Scale

— = completely unacceptable
- = unacceptable
v = acceptable
+ = good to excellent

1 Objectives and outcomes

1.1 Objectives

1.1.1 Extent to which objectives are typifying for a university education
1.1.2 Correspondence between the objectives and the Commission's minimum requirements
1.1.3 Possibilities for students to inform themselves beforehand of the objectives and outcomes of the programme

1.2 Outcomes

1.2.1 Translation of the objectives into outcomes
1.2.2 Correspondence between outcomes and the minimum requirements of the Commission

1.3 Translation of objectives and outcomes into a programme

1.3.1 Translation of objectives and outcomes into a programme
1.3.2 Correspondence between a programme and the minimum outcomes of the Commission

2 The programme

2.1 Progress in the programme
2.1.1 Number and extent of basic fundamental subjects
2.1.2 The possibility of choice at undergraduate level
2.1.3 The orientation function of the undergraduate course
2.1.4 Internal coherence of the programme
2.1.5 Evenness of the programme in terms of latitude and depth
2.1.6 Evenness of the programme in terms of compulsory and selective components
2.1.7 Specialisation possibilities at postgraduate level

2.2 Contents of the programme
2.2.1 Level of the general compulsory part
2.2.2 Level of the specialisation parts
2.2.3 Level and coherence of electives in terms of the objectives and outcomes of the programme
2.2.4 Level and coherence of fundamentals in terms of the objectives and outcomes of the programme
2.2.5 The programme's inclusion and recognition of new developments in the discipline

2.3 Teaching
2.3.1 The quality of different teaching forms (lectures, workshops, practicals, self-study)
2.3.2 The relationship between the different work forms
2.3.3 Frequency and intensity of contact with students
2.3.4 Quality of teaching material: guides, readers, text books
2.3.5 Use of computer-aided teaching and ICT in teaching

2.4 Testing/Evaluation
2.4.1 The correspondence between course material and examination papers or other forms of evaluation
2.4.2 The correspondence between examination/evaluation and the objectives and outcomes of the programme
2.4.3 The didactic quality of the examination papers
2.4.4 The organisation of examinations/evaluation (frequency, timetables, supplementaries)
2.4.5 The functioning of examination arrangements

2.5 General student skills: the programmes possibilities for students to acquire:
2.5.1 Writing skills
2.5.2 Presentation (oral) skills

2.5.3 Computer skills (including data collection skills and the use of the Internet)
2.5.4 Acquisition of laboratory skills
2.5.5 Problem-solving skills
2.5.6 Critical thinking skills
2.5.7 Learning skills
2.5.8 Independent working skills

3   Research projects/dissertations

3.1   The department's guidelines and requirements for projects/dissertations
3.2   Role, work and quality of the involvement of the study leader
3.3   Level and quality of dissertations
3.4   Quality of the evaluation of dissertations
3.5   Objectives of practical semester ("stage")
3.6   Control over practical semester

4   Student numbers and subsidy

4.1   The development of student numbers
4.2   Undergraduate subsidy earned
4.3   Postgraduate subsidy earned
4.4   The average duration of the study period

5   Learnability

5.1   Study load: factors contributing and restricting learnability
5.1.1 Correspondence between the programmed and the real undergraduate study load
5.1.2 Correspondence between the programmed and the real postgraduate study load
5.1.3 Identification of factors contributing or restricting learnability

5.2   Study information and learning assistance
5.2.1 Study information to prospective students
5.2.2 Information and advice during study
5.2.3 Informative value and overview of the programme study guide
5.2.4 Study (learning methods) assistance

6   Facilities
6.1   Lecture halls
6.2   Workshop space
6.3   Practical laboratories

6.4   Library
6.5   Computer facilities

7   Alumni
7.1   Level of the alumni
7.2   Relevance of their education/training for the labour market
7.3   Work possibilities

8   The staff

8.1   Post structure
8.2   Number of women on the staff
8.3   Staff's academic qualifications
8.4   The range of specialisation among staff
8.5   Student/staff ratio
8.6   Staff policy
8.7   Teaching activities of professors at undergraduate level
8.8   Didactic competencies of staff
8.9   The role of educational qualifications in the appointment of staff
8.10   Continued didactic schooling of staff
8.11   Frequency and quality of staff evaluation
8.12   The balance between teaching and research
8.13   The use of doctoral students as assistants

9   Internationalisation

9.1   The department's internationalisation policy
9.2   Extent and nature of international activities

10   Internal quality control

10.1   The self-evaluation report
10.1.1 The critical and analytical quality of the self-evaluation report
10.1.2 The usefulness of the report for the Commission
10.2   The previous evaluation
10.2.1 Actions taken in terms of the previous Commission's recommendations
10.3   Internal quality control
10.3.1 Procedures for curriculum revision, renewal and innovation
10.3.2 Functioning of the department's tuition and research committees
10.3.3 The involvement of students in teaching evaluations
10.3.4 Alumni bodies and the involvement of alumni in continued teaching evaluations

10.3.5 The internal quality control mechanisms as a quality guarantee (the incorporation of evaluation results and information from students and alumni in the teaching programme(s) and in staff policy

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