

Using EFQM in higher education: Ten years of experience with programme auditing at Hanzehogeschool Groningen

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This article gives an overview of ten years of experience with programme auditing at Hanzehogeschool Groningen. Hanzehogeschool Groningen is one of the bigger Dutch *hogescholen* (officially translated as "universities of applied sciences"). Ten years ago, it has set up an internal quality assurance system. It is an EFQM-based programme audit system in which every educational programme is audited once every three years on process quality. The programme audit system is linked on the one hand to the steering philosophy and planning and control cycle of the university, on the other hand to the Dutch external quality assurance system of programme accreditation every six years. The article describes the features of the programme audit system used by Hanzehogeschool Groningen. Although hard facts on the effectiveness of the system are currently not available, there are indications that the system leads to a rise in quality awareness within the institution. Five success factors are mentioned: facilitation and management support, a bottom-up approach, orientation on programme improvement, the use of a higher education-specific model, and linking the internal quality assurance system to the institution's steering mechanisms. The article concludes by highlighting six points for further discussion, such as the relationship between internal and external quality assurance, the independence of auditing from management, and the quality assurance of internal quality assurance.

1 Introduction

Although the quality of Dutch higher education has a good reputation and standing on the whole, there is also criticism (see e.g. *OECD 2007*), and it is feared that on the long run it cannot cope with growing international competition (*Ministerie van OCW 2007*, p. 3–7). For that reason, the international position of Dutch higher education is heavily debated – also in light of the Bologna and Lisbon processes. Matters of governance and internal and external quality assurance are central in this debate.

Since the famous government paper "Higher Education: Autonomy and Quality" (*Ministerie van OCW 1985*) and the introduction of the current higher education act in 1993, more and more autonomy has been granted to higher education institutions (*Zoontjes 2007, p. 10–11*). In quality assurance, this has meant that the institutions themselves became responsible for putting in place a system of quality assurance. This took the form of a site visit system ('*visitatiesysteem*'; *Inspectie van het onderwijs/Auditdienst 2005, p. 17–18*). The VSNU (*Vereniging van Universiteiten in Nederland* (Association of Universities in the Netherlands), the representative organisation of Dutch research universities) and the HBO-raad (*Hoger beroepsonderwijs-raad* (Higher Professional Education Council), the representative organisation of Dutch universities of applied sciences) developed a system in which each programme was scrutinized on a regular basis (generally once every five years) by an external committee. The committee looked into the quality of the programme, including the internal quality assurance procedures of the programme.

In line with the European turn towards accreditation systems, since 2003 the Dutch site visit system has been replaced by an accreditation system (*Inspectie van het Onderwijs 2005*). The formally independent Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation NVAO (*Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatie Organisatie*) grants accreditation to programmes once every six years on the basis of a visitation report drawn up by a so-called quality assessment agency, which bases its report on a self-evaluation report by the programme and a site-visit. On the basis of NVAO accreditation, national funding by the Ministry of Education can be gained. The system is criticized at present because of the costs and the bureaucracy of programme accreditation. It may therefore in the future be (partly) replaced by a system of institutional accreditation (*Ministerie van OCW 2006*), but this is still dependent on how trustworthy government and society in general deem the higher education institutions in matters of quality.

In the site visit system and the current accreditation system, attention is paid to the internal quality assurance procedures of the programme. Neither NVAO nor the Ministry of Education prescribe anything in detail here – higher education institutions are expected to have a sound system of internal quality assurance in place, but it is up to the responsibility of the individual institutions how this system looks like.

In the sector of the universities of applied sciences, some of the bigger institutions have been using EFQM-based systems for their internal quality assurance for quite some time. This article focuses on the experience of one of them, Hanzehogeschool Groningen, with EFQM programme auditing. After presenting the institution (section 2), its steering

philosophy and planning and control system are described (section 3). This is followed by a general description of the EFQM programme auditing system (section 4) and a description of the way this functions within Hanzehogeschool Groningen (section 5). Section 6 shortly discusses whether it is already possible to draw conclusions on the effectiveness of programme auditing. The article concludes by a description of important success factors (section 7) and points for further discussion (section 8).

2 Hanzehogeschool Groningen

Hanzehogeschool Groningen is a Dutch university of applied sciences (*hogeschool*) based in the city of Groningen, which has about 180,000 inhabitants. It is one of the about forty universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands. Together with the thirteen research universities they form the higher education system of the Netherlands. Within the Dutch binary higher education system, the universities of applied sciences have the specific task to deliver professionally-oriented higher education and, since a few years, to carry out applied research. They are broadly comparable to the German *Fachhochschulen*, but more teaching-oriented with only a small percentage of their academic staff holding doctoral degrees. Compared to German *Fachhochschulen*, they provide for a broader range of subjects, covering the complete range of higher professional education in the sectors economics and business administration, engineering and technology, agriculture, social welfare, health care, education (teacher training), and fine and performing arts.

The research capacity of the universities of applied science is a recent development. The idea is that universities of applied science carry out applied or practice-based research. In Hanzehogeschool Groningen, as in many universities of applied science, the choice has been made not to separate education and research – research is done by teachers in part of their appointment. In this article, therefore, when we mention “teachers”, this should be read as “teachers/researchers”. Nevertheless, the article confines itself to the use of EFQM in the quality assurance of educational programmes. Quality assurance of research in universities of applied sciences is currently being developed in the Netherlands and would deserve separate attention (see for example Borgdorff, Van der Vos & Van Staa 2007).

With 23,000 students, nineteen schools (equivalent to departments or *Fachbereiche*), about sixty Bachelor and fifteen Masters programmes, Hanzehogeschool Groningen is one of the bigger universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands. Subjects range from engineering to law, from sports studies to nursing, from marketing and management to arts and music.

3 Quality assurance at Hanzehogeschool Groningen

Over the years, Hanzehogeschool Groningen has strongly developed its steering philosophy and planning and control cycle. The basis of the steering philosophy is its orientation on results, which has led to the implementation of a four-year planning and control cycle on PDCA-basis. The PDCA-cycle, also known as the Deming-cycle after its inventor dr. W. Edwards Deming (*Hardjono/Bakker 2001: 96–99*), is basically a feedback loop. PDCA stands for "plan, do, check, act" and is based on the idea that quality rises if one repeats the four steps of the cycle continuously. For example, in education this involves to *plan* an educational module, teach the module (*do*), *check* if the teaching has been in conformity with the plans and has led to results, on that basis make adaptations in the module (*act*), *plan* the next execution of the module, etc.

Planning instruments such as formats for the institutional strategic plan, the school strategic plans and school annual plans, and management agreements between the executive board and the deans of the schools have been developed and are in use. This "planning side" is complemented on the "check side" of the PDCA circle by instruments for monitoring and control such as a whole set of instruments to measure stakeholder satisfaction and concrete financial and operational results. Results are presented in a so-called management dashboard. The management dashboard, recently put into use and constantly ameliorated, is a specially developed information technology tool for management (executive board and deans of schools) showing the current results regarding the major performance indicators at a glance. In addition to this, effort has been put into standardising the key central support processes.

Steering philosophy and planning and control cycle are of course means to an end. The general objective of Hanzehogeschool Groningen is expressed in its mission statement: "Hanze University Groningen produces enterprising, socially responsible and internationally oriented professionals, and contributes to knowledge circulation in North Netherlands" (*Hanzehogeschool Groningen 2005, p. 18*). In its "Framework for Quality Assurance", Hanzehogeschool Groningen has defined quality as "the degree to which [it] ... is successful in achieving its objectives to the satisfaction of itself, the government, the students, and prospective employers" (*Hanzehogeschool Groningen 2007, p. 1*). Three basic principles govern the framework for quality assurance:

- the primary processes – education and applied research – are central,
- quality assurance is system-oriented, i.e. it focuses on the organisation as a whole, including the supporting processes, and

- quality assurance is closely related to the steering philosophy and the planning and control cycle of the institute (*Hanzehogeschool Groningen 2007, p. 5–6*).

Hanzehogeschool Groningen has chosen to implement an internal quality assurance system based on EFQM auditing at the level of the educational programme. The audits show whether the way the processes within programmes – and at a higher level, schools – are run are quality-oriented. The audits are thus process-oriented and education-centred; how they work and what the relationship is with external quality assurance will be explained in more detail in the following sections.

Fundamental to the work on quality assurance is the idea that quality is a concept that should be owned by every single individual in the community of Hanzehogeschool Groningen. Quality is dependent on the professionalism of every individual; every individual has to feel responsible to deliver his or her proper quality. This may mean different things for the teacher, the caretaker, the student, the dean of a school or the member of the executive board. What unites them, however, is that maintaining and improving quality is a fundamental goal for everybody. We will come back to this later in this article.

4 The EFQM/INK model for universities of applied sciences

Hanzehogeschool Groningen works with an internal quality assurance system that has been developed over the past decade and a half. The work started in the early nineties when quality assurance experts from the Hogeschool van Amsterdam, Hogeschool InHolland, Fontys Hogescholen and the Hanzehogeschool Groningen gathered in the informal HBO expert group ('Expertgroep HBO'; HBO stands for *hogere beroepsonderwijs*, higher professional education, the type of education provided by *hogescholen* in the Netherlands). The goal of the HBO expert group, associated member of the European Foundation for Quality Management, was "the exchange and dissemination of knowledge and experience in the field of Total Quality Management in higher education" (*Expertgroep HBO, 2006, 1*).

On their search for a suitable quality assurance model for higher education institutions, they opted for the EFQM/INK model. INK stands for the Dutch Quality Institute (*Instituut Nederlandse Kwaliteit*). The EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Management) model basically looks at an organisation, its results, and the way the results lead to learning, improvement and innovation. It was developed for firms but can be applied to any kind of organisation. The model is visualised in the following well-known scheme with nine so-called "criteria" (see Graph 1).

Graph 1: EFQM model



The graph displays the organisational processes (criteria 1–5) at the left and the results (criteria 6–9) at the right hand side, which are subject to evaluation and measurement. Where necessary, adjustments are made on the basis of these assessments, thereby creating a coherent feedback loop. The central criterion in the EFQM model is number five, “management of processes”. In the case of higher education institutions, this may refer to education and/or research.

The Dutch Quality Institute INK extended the EFQM model by adding five developmental stages (see *Tillema/Markerink 2004, p. 13–30*). For each of the nine criteria, the organisation can be scored on a scale ranging from one to five, corresponding to the five developmental stages and expressing how sure it can be of obtaining quality regarding the respective criterion. The five developmental stages can be shortly described as follows:

- Stage 1 – Activity oriented: All activities take place on an individual and ad-hoc basis without written documentation;
- Stage 2 – Process oriented: Processes, teamwork and documentation are to some degree established;
- Stage 3 – System oriented: Processes are systematically improved on the basis of evaluation;

- Stage 4 – Chain oriented: External orientation (towards suppliers and customers; in the case of higher professional education for example secondary schools and labour market respectively) is broadly embedded in the organisation;
- Stage 5 – Total Quality Management: The organisation is innovative and takes initiatives, recognises its role in society, and benchmarks itself against other excellent organisations.

Growth from stage one to stage five usually takes place when shifts in the following dimensions take place:

- orientation: from internal to external,
- participation: from individual to society,
- policy making: from ad hoc to systematic,
- documentation: from informal to well-established,
- improvement: from problem-solving to anticipatory.

This can be graphically depicted as follows:

Graph 2: Dimensions of growth from stage 1 to stage 5

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5
Orientation			internal	→	external
Participation			individual	→	society
Policy making			ad hoc	→	systematic
Documentation			informal	→	well-established
Improvement			problem-solving	→	anticipatory

The HBO expert group developed a specification of the EFQM/INK model for universities of applied sciences called "Method for Improving the Quality of Higher Education Based on the EFQM model" (*Expertgroep HBO, 1995*). This version was incrementally refined on the basis of the findings from audits and in response to external developments. The newest update (fourth edition) takes into account the current accreditation system (*Expertgroep HBO, 2004*). The publication is in great demand and available in English language (*Expertgroup HBO, 2006*).

5 Programme auditing at Hanzehogeschool Groningen

How does auditing at Hanzehogeschool Groningen work? At Hanzehogeschool Groningen auditing at programme level takes place according to a three-year cycle. Sometimes, closely related programmes are audited together. Basically the auditing process consists of two phases: self evaluation followed by external evaluation. Different from many quality assurance systems, the self evaluation does not lead to the publication of a self-evaluation report. Instead, its aim is to reach consensus on a table of scores among those involved in the self evaluation.

The audit process starts with an instruction meeting in which everyone involved in the self evaluation phase of the auditing process is explained by an expert how the EFQM model works. It differs from programme to programme who will be involved, as this is the free choice of the programme management. It may be only the programme management, but mostly the key – or sometimes all – teachers are involved, often people from support services such as secretaries, planners or people concerned with the teaching facilities, and sometimes students. The number of people involved may range from five to more than twenty.

Every person involved then independently scores the programme along the nine criteria (all sub-divided into several aspects) of the EFQM model on a separate form. These scores are collected and put together in one overview, which is discussed in a so-called consensus meeting. During this meeting, members of the team present arguments for their scores and try to reach consensus. In most cases, the consensus meeting is led by a chair external to the programme, coming from the pool of trained auditors from Hanzehogeschool Groningen, who prepares a short consensus report. It consists of the scores and short explanations along the different criteria and aspects, and completes the internal phase. On the basis of this report, the programme management can draw conclusions on perceived strengths and weaknesses and make a first inventory of points to improve in the future.

Next, an external committee of three or four trained auditors is put together. The committee members are external from the point of view of the programme, but come from inside the institution. Based on a set of documents compiled by the programme team on demand, they score the programme provisionally. This is followed by the actual audit, a one-day visit in which the auditors seek confirmation of their initial scores, ask for explanation etc. Towards this end, they hold interview sessions with the management,

teachers, students, support staff, external stakeholders and a member of the executive board of the institution. Some of them will probably have been involved in the self evaluation phase of the audit, but this is no necessity. Based on these meetings, the committee compiles a final report with recommendations. It is handed over to the programme; a copy goes to the executive board. This document again gives the programme management suggestions for points of improvement, and comparison of the outcomes of the internal and the external phase of the audit may shed light on possible blind spots in the programme's self-perception.

This process is repeated once every three years for every programme, a frequency that has been set in line with the six-year rhythm of external accreditation. A "preparatory audit" is run about a year before the site visit of the accreditation agency takes place, an "intermediate audit" three years later. Programmes tend to value the preparatory audit highly, as it is perceived as a useful preparation for the accreditation process. The character of audit versus accreditation is nevertheless quite different: audits are process and improvement focused whereas accreditations are more product-oriented and lead to a yes-/no decision. From the perspective of quality assurance, the intermediate audit is no less important. Two years after accreditation, the concern for the quality of processes may have faded away a bit; an audit can then help to re-establish the focus on quality orientation among those involved in the running of the programme.

The audits are performed by trained auditors. Many of them are teachers, quite a few come from the support staff units, and management (some deans of schools, but mainly the management layer just below, so-called "team leaders" who are directly responsible for day to day business) is represented as well. At present, there are about eighty trained auditors in the institution, of which about fifteen have received more intense training in order to be able to act as chairperson of an audit committee. The training is organised internally, but the quality of the training is assured by the fact that many of the trainers have received external training on the EFQM/INK methodology.

6 Effects of the audit system

Does the audit system lead to measurable improvement? This is hard to judge as no clear criteria are available. No methodologically sound ranking system exists for Dutch universities of applied sciences which could be used to measure improvement. But even if there was, hard scientific proof of a causal link between the audit system and positive ranking results would be hard to establish. The same counts for the results of our own

planning and control cycle: although the university is performing well in many aspects, there is no possibility to link this one-to-one to the use of the EFQM auditing system. Comparison with other universities of applied sciences is no option either as there are no institutions with a fully comparable system. Our main body of evidence consists of about eighty audit reports, gathered over a period of about ten years, which depict changes regarding both the internal and the external situation.

A global study of this body of evidence as well as personal observation suggests that the appreciation of internal quality assurance has grown over the years through participation of a wide range of members of the institution in the programme audits. For what it is worth: average scores in audit reports are steadily mounting, from an overall score near stage two to an overall score well between stages two and three. In the external accreditation reports, the internal quality assurance system consistently receives a "good" score (on a four point scale ranging from "insufficient" through "sufficient" and "good" to "excellent"). At a conference at Hanzehogeschool Groningen on 12 October 2006, when we celebrated the fact that we have been using EFQM audits for a period of ten years, the president of the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation NVAO expressed his satisfaction with the work the Hanzehogeschool Groningen has done. We therefore carry on with the audit system. The growing appreciation of the importance of internal quality assurance alone would provide sufficient motivation.

The many audits and consensus meetings at Hanzehogeschool Groningen convinced us that quality assurance is not only concerned with measurement, but also with the processes in which many of our colleagues are actively involved. The approach is a uniform one, but variants exist in order to meet the requirements of specific programmes. The scope of audit may range from one to two or three programmes, the definition of "leadership" may vary from programme to programme (e.g. dean, team leader, or management team), sometimes the organisational criteria 1–5 are discussed with teachers and students whereas the results criteria 6–9 are discussed only with management, et cetera.

Improvement begins with constructive co-operation between people. A consensus meeting is an occasion *par excellence* for staff members of a particular programme to consult one another about the quality of education and its assurance. The interviews which take place as part of the audit process provide a picture of communication, development, engagement, and policy support. In the post-audit feedback, the audit team discusses points of departure for improvement, and the auditors can express their appreciation of the stronger aspects of the programme. This may then result in improvement strategies

regarding the processes in the programme, leading to better results and better quality and therefore to better accreditation results. It is this balance between focus on processes in the internal audit system and focus on content and outcomes in the external accreditation system that gives added value to both.

7 Success factors

Looking back at ten years of experience with EFQM auditing in higher education, we can identify five main success factors.

7.1 Facilitation and management support

Auditing all programmes every three years costs time and money. For the work of an audit team of three members, hundred hours have to be budgeted (40 for the chair, 30 for each of the other members). On top of that comes the time for preparing and holding the consensus meeting and the hours members of the programme team spend on preparing the audit (putting together the documentation, inviting students, staff and external stakeholders and the like). Furthermore, time is spent on training new auditors, on the yearly meeting of auditors, and on the co-ordination and quality assurance of the auditing programme as a whole.

This massive exercise cannot work on a purely voluntary basis. Contributing to quality assurance processes and products are therefore considered to be an integral part of normal daily work for staff, additional work such as e.g. the membership of an audit team is remunerated separately. Also, institutional management must see the benefits of such an extensive auditing programme, which is the case at Hanzehogeschool Groningen. The board stresses its importance, facilitates the process and takes the outcomes very seriously.

7.2 A bottom-up approach

For many people, internal quality assurance is not the most attractive subject. To keep quality assurance continuously on the agenda, it helps enormously if the exercise is not exclusively owned by a small group but is the concern of many people throughout the institution. The way the audit system has been set up takes this into account. Two important features stand out. First, auditors are ordinary staff members – in daily life they teach, lead (part of) a programme or work in a support role. As there are currently eighty

auditors, and the number is still growing (there is even more interest in becoming an auditor than can possibly be accommodated), expertise is widely spread throughout the institution. Second, a wide group of people participates in the consensus meetings and the following audits. Overall, at least half of teachers at Hanzehogeschool Groningen have at some point been in touch with the EFQM model, thereby learning how to think in quality assurance terms. Recently, half a day of EFQM training was included in the introductory programme for new teachers.

7.3 Improvement orientation

While the EFQM audit is an internal process from the perspective of the institution as a whole, it is perceived as "external" by the programme teams. People not connected to the programme come to scrutinize it, which is potentially threatening. At the same time, internal quality assurance only works if ownership is put in the hands of the professionals who finally have to deliver quality in their daily work: teachers and support staff. They will only assume ownership if they clearly see the benefits, which mainly lie in positive advice on how to (further) improve matters. At Hanzehogeschool Groningen, we therefore try to avoid an atmosphere of judging and to focus on feedback and dialogue instead. It is for this reason that in principle, the follow-up of the auditing process is put in the hand of the programme, that is the programme management. After the audit procedure, they possess a consensus report (expressing their own view) and an audit report (expressing an external view). Relating the two, formulating possible improvements, and putting them in the hands of staff, is done by the programme management itself and fed back into the planning and control cycle of the university. Mostly, audit reports will be an item of discussion between dean and executive board; if necessary they can for example agree upon including one or more improvement actions in their management agreement.

7.4 Using a higher education-specific model

A university of applied sciences is a community of professionals who are highly focused on their principal task: teaching and research in their specific area. Translating the general EFQM/INK model into a specific model for higher education has proven to be one of the main success factors. This holds in particular for the way the fifth – and core – aspect of EFQM, "management of processes", has been specified to refer to the primary processes of a university of applied sciences. Because the descriptions refer directly to teaching (and, still to a lesser extent, to research) and not to services in the labour

market as in the EFQM model, it becomes easier for people to relate to the rather abstract EFQM model.

7.5 Linking internal quality assurance to the steering system

An explicit link between the result-oriented steering mechanisms the institution uses and the audit system is a key success factor of the quality assurance system. The audit system itself can only measure whether or not the institution's processes will lead to completion of the PDCA cycle and therefore to better results, to an external focus etc. In reality, however, better results, external focus etc. are not a result of the audit system but of what people actually do in their daily work. The result-oriented steering philosophy provides the focus on results, the auditing system measures whether the processes work and where they can be improved. Auditing is a meta-process and only becomes useful if the processes under the meta-level receive attention. It is for that reason that e.g. most of the management contract is dedicated to actual results, and not for example on scores on separate criteria or aspects of the EFQM model.

8 Points for further discussion

On the basis of its 10-year experience, Hanzehogeschool Groningen will further develop its system of internal quality assurance based on EFQM. To complete this article, we would like to highlight six of the many open questions ahead.

8.1 The relationship between internal and external quality assurance

The balance between internal and external quality assurance is delicate. To many, one of the main purposes of the internal EFQM quality audits is to prepare for accreditation. We are, however, hesitant to stress this factor. Firstly, EFQM may be used for that end, but as other universities of applied science show, other instruments may be used just as well, for example a system of "test site visits" more directly linked to the external accreditation framework. Secondly, and more important, we believe that internal quality assurance is actually largely independent from external quality assurance. External quality assurance should in essence only confirm that the internal quality processes are sufficiently developed. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that there is a relationship. When we adapted the EFQM/INK model to higher education, we took into account the Dutch accreditation framework, for example by inserting an addendum at the end of the book describing in detail the relation between EFQM and the accreditation framework. Also,

we adapted the internal quality assurance cycle to the external quality assurance cycle of six years, not to our internal planning and control cycle of four years.

Nevertheless, internal quality assurance should not be reduced to an instrument for passing external accreditation. Recently, Hanzehogeschool Groningen discussed whether we should slightly adapt our internal quality assurance cycle, for instance by maintaining the audit preceding accreditation as it is, but by downscaling the intermediate audit to a lower level. We took the stance that the audits stand in their own right and therefore should stay as they are – if any change was to be made, we would rather lighten the preparatory audit and maintain a full-fledged intermediate audit to keep quality awareness between two accreditation processes on a high level.

8.2 The independence of auditing from management

An issue of continuous discussion is the relation between self improvement by the programme teams and management interference. Our auditing system primarily serves to heighten quality awareness among academic and administrative staff, challenging programme teams to look closely at themselves and confront their own ideas with the views of external auditors. However, as quality is of course a matter of primary concern for the higher levels of management (deans, executive board) as well, it is tempting to use the audit reports not only as an improvement catalyst but also as a control instrument. In Hanzehogeschool Groningen, this issue has never become really critical, but continuous awareness from both sides on potential goal confusion is required to ensure this.

8.3 The internal quality assurance of auxiliary processes

The audit system of Hanzehogeschool Groningen focuses on the primary process of teaching (and, lesser so but in a growing amount, on research), but takes into account all relevant support processes needed for education, such as student support, administration, media facilities etc. As a consequence, the auxiliary processes are often discussed in the context of education and less often in their own right. This may not give a complete picture of the quality of auxiliary processes and may be disappointing especially for those working in auxiliary support departments. Although the business of for example the financial department eventually is of course to support the education Hanzehogeschool Groningen offers, financial staff will often, and at least partly rightfully, consider financial processes, and not teaching processes, as their primary process. The quality assurance team of Hanzehogeschool Groningen has therefore started to experi-

ment with carrying out extra audits in support departments. Recently, the central offices for financial affairs and educational affairs were audited. An open challenge is to find the right audit model, as the EFQM/INK model for higher education is too education centred for this purpose. In the latest version of the model, an alternative description of criterion 5 has been included in an appendix. It seems however that it needs further refinement.

8.4 The limiting effect of the five-stage model

Hanzehogeschool Groningen states (*Hanzehogeschool Groningen 2007, p. 5*) that generally it is expected from programmes to function at stage 3, i.e. to be engaged in systematic and continuous improvement on the basis of evaluation (see section 4). One effect of this goal is that some programmes focus on attaining stage 3 and do not aim higher. This may at some point become counterproductive. The audit system should not be the quality benchmark for programmes. Rather, programmes should continuously try to improve their quality – and end up at stage 3 or higher at some point.

8.5 The pitfalls of systematic repetition

Related to the previous point, it sometimes happens that programmes treat the audit process as a "trick to be performed". Management, teachers, externals and sometimes even students know how the audit works, which paperwork is expected from them, and which answer they have to give in order to satisfy the committee. Honesty is crucial in auditing, and the quality assurance department of the university does its best to keep honesty and self-criticism at the heart of the process. The less threatening an audit is, the easier this becomes. In the actual audit processes we therefore stress constantly the fact that the process is owned by the programmes themselves, that the results are their results and the conclusions drawn are their proper conclusions.

8.6 The quality assurance of internal quality assurance

Finally, the quality assurance of the internal quality assurance system is crucial. Feedback on the quality of internal quality assurance is one of the items looked at in programme accreditation, and this feedback is positive. Including externally trained auditors in the pool of auditors is a concrete measure to ensure a high level of expertise. However, no surveys on "customer" satisfaction with internal quality assurance processes at Hanzehogeschool Groningen, or on auditors' views on the auditing system exist so far. This may

be an area of future improvement. Quality awareness at Hanzehogeschool Groningen should extend to all areas and levels – including quality assurance processes themselves.

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