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## Shaping or sharing? QA in a value-driven EHEA

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#### Short bio of the representatives of the three involved parties

Perry Coppiëns works as a Senior Inspector at the Higher Education department for the Dutch Inspectorate of Education. The Inspectorate monitors higher education institutions' compliance with legislation, financial regularity, and continuity, as well as the quality of the higher education system. As an inspector Perry is responsible for ensuring that higher education organisations (universities and universities of applied sciences) comply with laws and regulations. His work also contains thematic investigations into the quality of education and incidental inspections.

Patrick Leushuis is Senior Policy Advisor in the Dutch ministry of Education, Culture and Science, where he has worked since 2011. He works on lifelong learning in higher education and flexibilization of higher education. From 2013-2014 he was Secretary of the Advisory Committee on flexible higher education for adult learners and developed the framework for the experiment and the related subsidy scheme related. From 2006-2010 he worked for the Project Directorate Working and Learning. Previously, he worked for 19 years as Programme Leader and Advisor on educational innovation in universities of applied sciences.

Henri Ponds is Policy Advisor at NVAO, a position he has held since 2003. He is responsible for the processing of applications for (initial) accreditation and institutional audits. He trains experts and secretaries to prepare them for participation in assessment procedures (initial) accreditation and institutional audits. Currently he is involved in the preparation of a new accreditation system in the Netherlands (from 2025 on). Henri often represents NVAO at seminars and congresses in the field of higher education. He has a special interest for the development of level 5 (of the European Qualification Framework, EQF) in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

Perry, Patrick and Henri are members of the project team comprised of the Ministry, the Inspectorate and NVAO that is guiding the experiment on flexible higher education based on learning outcomes.

#### Proposal

**Title: Flexible higher education for adult learners - a national experiment for adult students in higher education in the Netherlands with a new educational concept based on learning outcomes and learning path independency (2016 - 2023)**

#### Abstract

Around 2001, part-time modes of study programmes started to show decreasing numbers of adult students who combine a professional career with (further) higher education. A research committee initiated by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science recommended that part-time programmes be based on an educational

concept with a focus on learning outcomes and tailor-made learning paths to deliver better opportunities for adult students. Consequently, the government decided to start a national experiment (2016–2023) in which 21 universities of applied sciences participated. The results of the experiment showed the following: (1) developing learning outcomes as an integration of knowledge, skills and a critical professional activity is an important step forward for students, staff and the involved professional field to apply blended (including work-based) learning; (2) an output-oriented educational concept stimulates students and staff to reflect more on appropriate learning paths; (3) taking control of their own learning activities is not self-evident for adult students either.

### 1. Introduction

This proposal describes the reasons to start an experiment flexible higher education based on learning outcomes in Dutch HE, the way of implementation of the experiment and its preliminary results. The experiment started in 2016 and will finish on 1 September 2023.

### 2. Why did we start the experiment on flexible higher education with learning outcomes?

In 2012 the ministry of Education, Culture and Science (hereafter the ministry) commissioned an analysis of the developments in part-time higher education for adult learners. It was found that over the years the provision of part-time programs by both academic universities and universities of applied sciences was reduced; since 2001 the enrolment of adult learners in part-time higher education was reduced by 50%. As a result the ministry asked an independent organization to investigate possible reasons. The researchers concluded a one-sided focus on full-time programs for younger students and its improvement, caused by policies from government, as well as by the institutions, as important reasons. Institutions did not really see adult learners as their target group; they had to deal with growing numbers of younger students. The part-time programs were merely derived from the full-time programs and not tailored to the characteristics and needs of adult learners. The conclusion was that part-time higher education needed to become more flexible and attractive.

In 2013 the ministry installed a committee 'Flexible higher education for adult learners' and asked the committee to develop advice on policy measures to be taken to improve provision of part-time higher education and increase participation of adult learners. The need to increase participation was identified because of the growing shortages of qualified labour force, especially in engineering, IT, education, and health care. Based on an analysis of (international) studies the advisory committee concluded that higher education programs for adult learners should have the following characteristics.

- Provide possibilities to participate on a modular basis (microcredentials), resulting in credit points that are stackable and transferable and can lead to formal qualifications (HE-degrees).
- Alignment with practical professional experience of the adult learner, by:
  - recognition and validation of relevant knowledge and skills;
  - inviting adult learners to bring in their needs and questions for learning and development and use those as a starting point for learning activities;
  - create possibilities for application of models and theoretical knowledge in a professional work environment and reflection on theory and practice;
- Provide flexible and efficient learning paths:
  - with exemptions and shortened programs based on validation of relevant knowledge and skills;
  - use of the workplace as a learning environment;
  - use of e-learning/blended learning

Besides this the advisory committee concluded that the funding system should enhance and encourage provision of flexible HE-programs for adult learners and stimulate adult learners to enroll in these programs.

The advice on flexible higher education for adult learners (2014) contained a variety of policy measures, which lead to the introduction of loans for adult learners ('lifelong learning loans') and the start of two experiments: an experiment on designing flexible part-time and work-based programs in higher education based on learning outcomes and an experiment on demand-driven funding. In this paper we will discuss the experiment on flexible education based on learning outcomes.

### 3. Characteristics of the experiment on flexible higher education based on learning outcomes

The experiment focuses on adult learners in part-time and work-based learning programs in higher education. Participation in the experiment was open to both universities of applied sciences and research universities, with their degree programs (associate degree/short cycle higher education, bachelor's degree, master's degree). In the experiment it is no longer compulsory to establish and describe fixed programs that apply to all students. Instead, it is enough to establish learning outcomes, that are described as the output of the learning process in units of the programme. These learning outcomes apply to all students, but their learning paths leading to achievement of these outcomes may vary. This provides opportunities to make agreements with students on the specific learning activities they employ, what classes or training programs they will take part in, online and offline, how they are going to use their workplace, how they are going to provide evidence for attaining the learning outcomes and how they will be guided.

The units of learning outcomes have an amount up to 30 credit points (ects). The maximum of 30 credit points was established to retain insight in structure and cohesion of the learning outcomes, building up to the qualification at the final level of the programs. There was no definition or format prescribed in the experiment on how learning outcomes should be formulated, but a set of criteria was provided for the learning outcomes to be used.

- Learning outcomes should allow for a variety of learning activities and learning paths of students.
- All units of learning outcomes should represent the final qualifications of the programme.
- The learning outcomes should be recognizable for the professional field, be relevant and representative for contemporary professional practice and developments.
- The learning outcomes should be coherent:
  - each unit of learning outcomes should contain a coherent set of learning outcomes that is distinctive from other (units of) learning outcomes;
  - jointly and in coherence the learning outcomes should enable the student to reach the final qualifications of the programme.
- The learning outcomes should be specific and measurable, form a solid foundation for an unambiguous framework for learning path-independent assessment.
- Transparent: the relationship between final qualifications, units of learning outcomes, learning activities and assessment should be clear.
- Sustainable: the learning outcomes should last and be useful for several years.

The use of learning path-independent assessment is compulsory in the experiment and can be complemented with other forms of assessment. The use of learning agreements is also compulsory in the experiment.

#### 4a. Subsidy scheme

In 2015 both public and private higher education institutions could apply for subsidies provided by the government. Subsidies were available for activities related to the development of flexible learning based on learning outcomes. This includes activities related to the development of the flexible educational model, the learning outcomes, learning agreements, learning path-independent assessment, validation of prior learning, the use of work-based learning, online learning, organizational development, IT-systems and training and development of staff. The total budget was € 32 million.

An external, independent expert committee assessed the plans sent in by 32 HE-institutions. In the end 21 institutions received a subsidy: 15 public and 6 private HEI's. None of the plans of the research universities were approved by the committee, only universities of applied sciences received a subsidy and participate in the experiment.

#### 4b Assessment of new educational concepts by NVAO and Inspectorate of higher education

After approval of the institutional application by the ministry of Education (OCW) the higher education institution submitted an application for approval of the design of the new educational concept to NVAO and the Inspectorate of Education. NVAO assessed the application based on NVAO's framework for programme assessment consisting of the standards Intended learning outcomes, Teaching-learning environment, Student-assessment and Achieved learning outcomes. The Inspectorate of Education assessed the compliance of the application with legal regulations. NVAO and Inspectorate received applications of 21 Universities of Applied Sciences. About 80% of the applications succeeded on first attempt, 20% after resit. In their joint decision about the application NVAO and Inspectorate formulated recommendations which were reviewed in a later stage of the experiment.

NVAO, in consultation with the ministry and the Inspectorate, decided to implement one extra accreditation assessment on the demonstrated quality of the participating programs to monitor the effect of the new educational concept on student performance: 'Do students achieve the required learning outcomes of the programme?'

#### 4c Monitoring of the experiment

The Ministry, NVAO and the Inspectorate used three instruments to monitor the experiment process and to contribute to the best possible implementation of the educational concept in every participating university.

- From 2016 on four times a year the ministry organised national meetings for the participating institutions for the purpose of exchanging learning experiences; good practice and failures. In preparation for a meeting three, each time different, institutions took the lead and shared their experiences on a specific topic. The institutions appreciated these meetings very much as they increased enthusiasm and a lot of positive energy that was transferred to the participating programs in their institutions. In the evaluation of the experiment the institutions argued for continuation of this kind of cooperation between higher education institutions.
- Another applied instrument was the monitor-visit to the institutions. A team of representatives of the Ministry, NVAO and the Inspectorate visited every university two or three times during the experiment period of six years. The conversations had a development-oriented approach and were held with representatives of the board, programme management, teachers, students, and the professional field. The institution received a

report of the visit with reflections on the course of the experiment and supplied recommendations. On the other hand, the institutions provided the ministry with feedback on the legislative proposal to be developed in continuation of the experiment ending per September 2023.

- A third monitor instrument used were the so-called growth documents. Every year the institutions sent a progress report on the four previously mentioned standards of NVAO's framework to the Ministry, NVAO and the Inspectorate. These growth documents, in fact self-evaluation reports, were the starting point for the monitor visits. The essence of a growth document is that every new one is a follow-up on the former one. In this way the administrative load for the institution is restricted.

## 5. Results of the experiment

### A. Final evaluation ResearchNed

The experiment was assessed in 2019 (intermediate evaluation) and 2021 by ResearchNed (an independent research institute that specialises in social-scientific research, policy advice, and knowledge transfer in the overall field of education). Both evaluations were positive. Therefore, the Minister of Education, Culture and Science intends to include flexible education and working with learning outcomes in the Higher Education and Research Act (WHW).

In general, institutions are enthusiastic about the learning outcomes experiment and would like to continue this approach. All universities of applied sciences see the potential of the experiments in learning outcomes for the quality of education and the connection with professional practice. None of the respondents prefer to return to the situation before the experiment. They see an irreversible process that will continue within the institution anyway. Elements from the experiment, such as the concept of the learning outcomes, are also used in regular education. According to institutions, the experiments also require structural adjustments to the legal frameworks. Some of the main results:

- There is a lot of enthusiasm and support from almost all the institutions, students, teachers, and professional field involved in the learning outcomes experiment.
- The influx of students in part-time and dual higher professional education programs has increased by approximately 50% compared to the influx in 2015. The growth in influx at the experimental programs is bigger than in other part-time and dual programs.
- The effects on graduation rate (obtaining a diploma) are not clear yet, but all students report at the start that they want to continue until they obtain their diploma.
- Most employers are satisfied with the experimental study programs. According to employers, students are asked to adopt a more active learning attitude, more customization is possible and there is a closer connection to the professional practice.
- Most students are satisfied with the programme and the flexible options. Flexible study programs usually involve a mix of online learning, classroom teaching and workplace learning. More than half (55-59%) of all respondents are satisfied with this mix.
- Some of the students (18%), however, are critical about the experimental programs and would not recommend it to others. Student dissatisfaction is either related to too high expectations for flexibility or, on the contrary, to the desire for more structure.

In conclusion, the researchers state that the experiments unmistakably promise a positive and promising development in higher vocational education, with a potential extension to the entire (full-time) higher educational system. This does not change their concern that several institutions and study programs still appear to be in the pioneering and development phase more than four years after they started, and that this is still accompanied by relatively high student dissatisfaction. It remains necessary to properly introduce new lecturers to the flexible learning concept, because it differs from how lecturers (and students) are used to designing their educational processes. The further development of supporting ICT systems is often lagging and continues to require attention. All in all, the transition to a mature, crystallized system of learning outcomes is yet incomplete and there is still some work to be done.

ResearchNed concludes that it is desirable that the proposed amendment to the WHW to allow for flexible learning, leaves as much freedom as possible to institutions and study programs to organize part-time and dual (and if desired, full-time) education as optimally as possible, with structured learning paths, based on learning outcomes.

### B. General findings project group (Ministry, NVAO, Inspectorate)

The flexibilization project group of the Ministry, Inspectorate and NVAO recognizes the conclusions of ResearchNed and agrees that progress has been made, but a lot of steps can be taken to improve the possibilities of flexible education.

*"80% of the students opt for the default route"*

The aim of the experiment is more direction of students over their own study program and, in consultation with the study programme, opting for an individual study track. In practice, institutions report that many students still must get used to self-direction and that they also need better supervision.

The experiment shows that flexible learning does not suit everyone, and that students' expectations of their study programs do not always match reality. Dissatisfaction among students is either related to too high expectations of flexibility or, on the contrary, to the desire for more structure, i.e., more structured study paths. Clear information for prospective students is essential, so students know better in advance what they are opting for, and they can choose a study program that suits them best in terms of study route.

#### *Study plan*

An important document in this regard is the education agreement, or study plan as it is now referred to in the bill. In the study plan the degree program and student lay down, among other things, what the study route will consist of. Both for the institution and the student, the study plan provides a solid basis for the programme to be completed during the study. The study plan is intended to facilitate periodic discussions between the student and the coach about the interpretation of the flexible learning route of the student. It is therefore a dynamic document that can be adjusted and supplemented. At the start of the experiment the study plan was mainly seen as bureaucratic and caused some inconvenience. This has gradually improved, but still it is used differently in practice. There is still room for improvement. It could be used more as a steering tool and thus cater for students who want more customization.

#### *Utilization of flexible options grows in the course of the programme*

The use of flexibility by students grows in the course of the program and become better acquainted with the options and depends on the stimulation and support offered by the coach.

#### *Very dependent on support and encouragement from teachers/coaches*

It remains necessary to properly introduce new lecturers to the flexible learning concept, because it differs from how lecturers (and students) are used to designing their educational processes. Institutions see complaints from some students about lack of clarity and lack of guidance and structure (see below) as part of the transition that has not yet been completed.

#### *Hybrid model, flexibility especially in working learning and professional products*

Study programs use a kind of hybrid model. The education in which the student participates is often part of the programmed standard route and the flexible implementation is often found in the work-based learning and in professional products in which students demonstrate mastery of learning outcomes.

#### *Learning-independent assessment is crucial*

Learning-independent assessment is a prerequisite for flexible learning routes. It must be possible to demonstrate learning outcomes that have been achieved through a wide range of possible activities. Expertise and experience of the institutions in that area has greatly increased during the experiment. There is a growing confidence, also among examination boards.

#### *Validation / recognition of prior learning*

It is striking that validation prior to study is hardly applied. It was expected that adult students would be interested in shortening their programme from the start on, based on validation and exemptions. Instead, experienced students speed up their study pace to shorten the programme. In addition, some students say they have no need for validation, because they want to be completely 'immersed' in knowledge and skills at college level.

#### *Structural implementation in legislation*

Dutch government will probably decide positive on structural implementation of the legal framework of the experiment in higher education legislation, because of the positive experiences and impact of the experiment and the enthusiasm among HEI's, students and employers. Currently the bill is in parliament.

#### *Discussion questions for the session:*

- Do you have similar good experiences with calibration of institutions on a national or regional scale focusing on specific quality issues?
- To what extent, in your opinion, ownership of learning pathways can be asked from adult students?
- What can be expected from staff/ teachers regarding learning new teacher roles in student guiding and student assessment?

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