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Paper

Future-proofing higher education through institution-owned quality assurance: lessons from the Flemish institutional review cycle 2020–2025

Abstract

This policy paper uses the Flemish institutional review as a system-level case study to explore how external quality assurance can support future-proof higher education without prescribing one model of innovation, curriculum development or institutional quality assurance.

The paper draws on an anonymised thematic synthesis of the Flemish institutional review cycle 2020–2025, conducted under the Flemish Quality Assurance System 2019–2025. A central feature of the Flemish approach is that the mechanisms, criteria, feedback loops and assurance practices, through which institutions confirm programme quality, are developed by the institutions themselves (i.e. own conduct). NVAO's open and appreciative review approach does not impose a uniform quality assurance model at programme level. Instead, independent review panels assess whether each institution meets the assessment ground as a whole. In doing so, they examine whether its educational policy, including its own conduct for confirming programme quality, is coherent, informed by evidence and stakeholder input, and effective within its mission, context and stage of development.

The analysis shows that future-proofing higher education depends not only on visible educational innovations such as digital learning, interdisciplinary curricula or work-based learning, but also on institution-owned mechanisms that make educational development sustainable and demonstrable. Five transferable lessons are identified at institutional level. First, institutions need clear mechanisms for translating strategic ambitions into programme-level practice. Second, institutional autonomy benefits from transparently defined, institution-owned criteria for assurance, differentiated follow-up and intervention. Third, external stakeholders, including the world of work, should contribute to quality judgements rather than merely being consulted. Fourth, data-informed quality assurance strengthens adaptability when information is discussed and interpreted within its educational context, rather than treated as self-explanatory. Fifth, trust in institutional ownership depends on effective feedback loops, formal decisions on programme quality and accessible public information.

The paper invites discussion on how open external quality assurance can respect institutional ownership while making accountability, societal relevance and future-proofing visible.

1. Introduction

How can external quality assurance assess institutional responses to educational change without prescribing those responses? Changing professional practices, technology and societal expectations invite curriculum renewal and dialogue with the world of work. Yet the educational value of artificial intelligence, interdisciplinary modules or work-based learning depends on institutional vision, programme learning outcomes, student needs and wider academic and societal responsibilities; their introduction alone does not demonstrate future-oriented education.

The Flemish institutional review offers a policy case. Institutions confirm the quality of their accredited programmes through arrangements of their own choosing. An independent panel appointed by NVAO assesses the institution's educational policy, including its conduct for confirming programme quality, and advises NVAO; NVAO takes the institutional review decision. The review does not prescribe a uniform internal quality assurance model but examines how the institution's arrangements function in its own context.

Drawing on NVAO's thematic overview of the 2020–2025 institutional review cycle, this paper develops five lessons about educational development and institutional responsibility. Its central argument is that introducing educational change is not enough: institutions must also be able to examine programme quality, identify where improvement is needed and demonstrate how they act on their findings. Independent external review assesses whether institutions fulfil that responsibility without prescribing their internal arrangements. The source reports examine policies, practices and judgements; they do not measure future-readiness or establish effects on graduate outcomes.

2. The Flemish arrangement: autonomy within a public framework

Under the Flemish Quality Assurance System 2019–2025, universities and universities of applied sciences determined how to organise their own conduct (eigen regie): the actions, processes, practices, procedures and tools through which they confirm the quality of their accredited programmes. The institutional review, introduced in 2015–2016 and operating within this framework during the cycle examined here, assessed the institution's educational policy, including this conduct (NVAO, 2020).

The four coherent questions set out in the assessment ground determine the scope of the institutional review. The assessment ground further elaborates the institution's responsibility for its educational policy and for confirming programme quality through its own conduct. Under the assessment rule, the institution is assessed against the assessment ground as a whole. The four questions are not weighted separately, and the decision follows from a holistic and substantiated judgement. The eight quality features guide institutions in developing their own conduct and review panels in evaluating that conduct

as part of the educational policy. They do not constitute separate standards against which the review panel assesses individual programmes.

Domain-specific learning outcomes provide a common reference point for qualifications, which institutions translate into programme-specific learning outcomes and curricula. This illustrates how shared expectations concerning educational quality coexist with institutional autonomy in programme development. In its system-level reflections, NVAO also identifies the need to consider how these shared outcomes remain current as programmes and disciplines evolve. This concerns the continued relevance of common reference points rather than an identified shortcoming across individual programmes (NVAO, 2026).

Institutional review is distinct from institutional accreditation: only programmes are accredited. New programmes undergo initial accreditation and subsequently a first programme accreditation before responsibility for confirming their quality passes to the institution. A positive institutional review decision, including one with limited validity, can lead to an extension of the accreditation periods of eligible programmes. It does not authorise institutions to accredit programmes themselves.

NVAO's Appreciative Approach takes trust, institutional context and the institution's own educational choices as its starting points. It nevertheless allows for independent, critical and holistic assessment. The underlying philosophy assumes that institutions meet the assessment ground; any contrary judgement requires detailed substantiation. The overview report of the institutional reviews 2020-2025 records 13 positive institutional review decisions and five positive decisions with limited validity across the 18 regular reviews. It also identifies two cases in which NVAO imposes conditions where the review panel formulates recommendations or critical points for attention. These outcomes illustrate that the Appreciative Approach does not preclude critical judgement or intervention where necessary (NVAO, 2026).

3. Methodology

The principal source is NVAO's October 2026 overview report of the institutional reviews 2020-2025 on 18 regular institutional reviews and three reassessments conducted between March 2021 and October 2025 under the 2019–2025 system. Panels examined each institution's Critical Reflection, existing documentation and public information, and pursued context-specific questions through dialogue and in-depth review trails. Their assessment reports documented findings, considerations and, where relevant, recommendations or conditions. The overview synthesised these reports without reassessing the institutions or identifying individual cases in the thematic findings (NVAO, 2026).

Recurrent topics in the panels' research proposals were categorised by subject; related findings and considerations were brought together under five overarching reporting themes, while recommendations and conditions were considered separately. Frequencies therefore describe how often a topic was explicitly selected for in-depth investigation, not how often a particular practice or deficiency occurred. The three reassessments were excluded from those frequencies, as they concentrated on conditions

attached to earlier decisions. Across the regular reviews, the institution's conduct for confirming programme quality featured in every in-depth investigation, while the external perspective was explicitly selected in 17. These counts indicate review priorities and should not be read as rankings of institutional performance. Since each investigation reflected its institution's context, the absence of a topic from a report cannot establish its absence from an institution.

This paper develops a secondary interpretation in five lessons rather than reproducing the overview's reporting themes. Its examples are aggregated patterns, not prevalence estimates or identifiable cases. NVAO's later reflections also took account of stakeholder feedback, external evaluation and methodological experience; these are distinguished from panel findings. The institutional illustrations supplied by a co-author describe practice at Hasselt University and are not evidence from the anonymised synthesis. No new analysis of individual assessment reports or empirical comparison with other countries was undertaken. Accordingly, the findings concern the Flemish context and cannot demonstrate causal effects on innovation, employability or future-readiness.

4. Five lessons from the review cycle

4.1 From strategic ambitions to programme practice

Panels examined how institutional educational visions and strategies reflected institutional identity, societal challenges and programme contexts. They often valued clear visions rooted in institutional values but also examined how broad ambitions informed priorities and programme development. Strategic coherence could not be inferred from a vision alone: panels considered whether institutions implemented, monitored and adjusted policy across faculties, departments and programmes. They valued coherent development programmes with room for locally appropriate implementation. Intermediate organisational levels and support services helped connect central policy with teaching practice. Recurrent questions concerned information flows, the sharing of useful practices and decisions to expand, consolidate, adapt or discontinue initiatives. The overview thus points to a two-way relationship: institutional priorities inform programme decisions, while programme experience provides evidence for reconsidering those priorities. For future-oriented education, the implication concerns the capacity to evaluate and adjust policy implementation, not a measured effect of educational innovation (NVAO, 2026, pp. 13–15).

At Hasselt University, civic engagement was a priority in the 2022–2025 Education Policy Plan and is developed as 'learning in partnership' in the 2025–2029 Institutional Strategy. Academic and support staff translated this aim into actions approved by the Education Council. Programme teams then determine how to incorporate civic engagement within their own profile, with consultation of relevant stakeholders (Farnell, 2020).

Programmes monitor their strategic plans, which are discussed at faculty strategy meetings every three years. Annual meetings between programme directors and the central Office for Educational Development, Policy and Quality Assurance inform institution-wide monitoring and carry programme

experience back to policymakers. Different approaches include a mathematics modelling week based on problems from industry and research, and an architecture course examining the lived environment. These examples illustrate room for programme-specific choices within a shared strategic direction.

4.2 Ownership requires intelligible criteria for support and intervention

The overview reports that institutions had further embedded their own quality assurance arrangements, although their organisation and development varied. Panels valued systematic monitoring and follow-up but questioned whether extensive processes and documentation remained proportionate, understandable and useful to educational practice. Some institutions differentiated programme autonomy and support through assessments of maturity that were not always explicit. Panels asked which considerations justified greater local freedom, closer monitoring or intervention. Rather than prescribing one maturity model, they sought transparent reasoning for differentiated follow-up. The balance between central coordination and programme autonomy remained context-dependent (NVAO, 2026, pp. 15–18). In several reviews, the concern was how to maintain workable procedures as the institution's own conduct became more elaborate. The overview treats proportionality as part of effective assurance rather than as an alternative to it.

Beyond intervention criteria, institutions determine how they examine and confirm programme quality within the common assessment ground and eight guiding quality features. Panels investigated how quality assurance findings were interpreted, strengths and points for attention were followed up, and responsibilities were assigned. The overview identifies the institution's formal determination of programme quality as a crucial connection. External advice may inform this decision but does not replace the institution's integrated consideration of the results and outcomes of its conduct. For future-oriented educational development, the implication is a clear path from evidence through judgement to follow-up, rather than identical internal structures (NVAO, 2026, pp. 16–20, 27–28).

At Hasselt University, programmes follow a six-year quality assurance cycle. An institutionally convened independent external panel, including academic and educational experts, professional-field representatives and external students, examines programme quality against eight institutional quality clusters, translated into criteria for the relevant qualification levels and the ESG. This is part of the university's own conduct, distinct from an NVAO-appointed institutional review panel.

The Educational Quality Assurance Board considers the panel's advice alongside institutional monitoring data and may require improvement measures. The Board of Governors formally endorses the quality decision and programme strategy and action plan. Implementation is reviewed annually with the central Office for Educational Development, Policy and Quality Assurance, with a mid-cycle review of programme objectives.

Responsibility is distributed across levels. Programme Management Teams oversee curricula, educational quality, staffing needs and engagement with professional stakeholders. Faculties review curriculum changes, support programmes and provide an escalation route when concerns cannot be

resolved locally; they may also develop shared policies on assessment, artificial intelligence or curriculum components. Central educational advisers link programme teams with institution-wide quality assurance and monitor progress without displacing programme-level responsibility.

At institutional level, the Education Council advises on educational policy and quality assurance, the Board of Governors approves curricula and reviews quality-monitoring outcomes, and the Vice Rector for Education follows up structural concerns. The arrangement combines shared institutional direction with faculty and programme autonomy.

4.3 The external perspective should influence judgements

An external perspective featured in the in-depth research trails of 17 of the 18 regular institutional reviews; this describes a research focus, not the prevalence of external engagement. The overview documents benchmarking, advice on curriculum renewal and assessment, professional advisory bodies, programme reviews and scrutiny of achieved learning outcomes. Panels valued external expertise but examined participants' independence, the breadth of networks and the grounds for selecting experts. Some called for clearer expertise and independence criteria. An advisory council or external review is therefore not, by itself, evidence of how outside perspectives informed judgements on programme quality (NVAO, 2026, pp. 18–19).

External stakeholders and external, independent peers and experts fulfil distinct but complementary roles. Professional partners can inform curriculum relevance; independent experts also contribute to examining programme quality, including assessment, achieved learning outcomes and improvement. The overview found that input to curriculum development or quality assurance processes could be visible while its influence on analysis and decisions was less clear. Panels therefore sought evidence of whose views informed the institution's judgement and what action followed. The same question applies to the involvement of students and teaching staff: their input needs to be considered, not merely collected. This does not prescribe a consultation format, but calls for demonstrable influence on institutional decisions while distinguishing professional consultation from independent scrutiny (NVAO, 2026, pp. 18–19, 28). Questions about achieved learning outcomes and student assessment also require perspectives extending beyond routine professional consultation.

At Hasselt University, a 2022 revision of its own conduct strengthened the independence and complementarity of programme review panels. Programmes propose candidates representing disciplinary, educational, professional, international and student perspectives; the central Quality Assurance Office checks independence and expertise, and the Educational Quality Assurance Board approves the composition.

Panels examine assessment, achieved learning outcomes and institutional quality criteria. Programme leaders respond to findings before the Educational Quality Assurance Board reaches its judgement. The resulting programme action plan is monitored annually, with escalation to institutional leadership where needed.

Programme development involves a separate form of engagement. Programmes consult professional stakeholders annually, often through advisory bodies addressing curricula, work-based learning or final projects. Staff and student perspectives also inform programme development and quality assurance. The university expects programme teams to show how that input influences enhancement, rather than simply documenting that consultation occurred.

4.4 Information becomes useful through interpretation

Review reports describe increasing use of management information, surveys, dashboards and strategic indicators. Panels valued data that made policy implementation visible but noted that information could be difficult to interpret or use. Dashboards sometimes described activity or progression without showing what interventions achieved. The overview therefore distinguishes recording events from understanding their implications. Several panels recommended defining evaluation criteria and follow-up when introducing policy, rather than retrospectively guessing its effects. Information must be interpreted in context, not treated as proof of educational quality in itself (NVAO, 2026, pp. 14–15). The reviews also asked whether information was accessible to the organisational levels expected to use it. A useful indicator for central monitoring may require additional discussion before it can inform a programme team's choices.

A change in progression may relate to curriculum design, assessment, student support or differences between cohorts. Staff and stakeholders must consider explanations before deciding whether action is warranted. The implication for future-oriented education is that information should inform decisions, follow-up and reconsideration, not merely reporting (NVAO, 2026, pp. 14–15).

At the programme development level at Hasselt University, the key question is how evidence from multiple sources is integrated into well-founded decision-making. Consider the example of revising the portfolio of specialisation tracks. Sustainable decisions require input from programme management, the faculty board, institutional educational leadership, and the governing board. Evidence informing these decisions may include business intelligence data on student enrolment and staff efficiency, findings from alumni and employer surveys, recommendations from external academic reviewers, and student feedback collected through programme evaluations. Based on this evidence, decisions can be made to offer specialisation tracks across one or more programmes, discontinue existing tracks, or replace them with minor pathways.

Subsequently, business intelligence data on student progression and completion, together with external evaluations of achieved learning outcomes across the various specialisation tracks, inform the follow-up phase in which curriculum reforms are monitored and, where necessary, adjusted. In this way, data serve not only a monitoring function but also support strategic programme management and development.

4.5 Trust needs a public expression of quality

The 2019–2025 framework required the institution's board to make a substantiated statement on each accredited programme's quality, reflecting results and outcomes of its conduct, strengths and points for attention. The overview reports varied institutional arrangements, but panels expected the competent governing body to assume clear responsibility and explain its evidence and reasoning. External reviews could inform, but not replace, the institution's integrated judgement. This formal determination differs from NVAO's institutional review decision and programme accreditation. The later English framework explicitly uses 'confirmation decision'; the underlying responsibility already applied in the earlier review cycle (NVAO, 2020, pp. 8, 11; NVAO, 2026, pp. 19–20, 27–28).

Institutions were also required to make programme-quality information public. The overview identifies cases of outdated, generic or unclear information, or accounts insufficiently connected to institutional quality judgements. Panels and NVAO examined whether readers could obtain a current, credible account of strengths, points for attention and follow-up. Public information should flow from institutional analysis, formal determination and improvement, enabling students and others to understand programme quality. In two cases NVAO imposed conditions where panels had recommended improvements to either formal quality determination or public information. Critical decisions were therefore possible within an appreciative, trust-based system (NVAO, 2026, pp. 19–25, 27–28). This issue matters particularly because institutional autonomy shifts responsibility for public explanation towards the institution. The overview stresses that public accounts must be understandable to their intended audiences and reflect both strengths and points for attention, rather than simply state that assurance procedures have occurred.

At Hasselt University, the 2016 conduct drew public information mainly from external reviews. The revised 2022 conduct also draws on internal monitoring, stakeholder surveys and institutional data. The Educational Quality Assurance Board identifies the sources informing its judgement; the central Office prepares public information, which programme management checks for factual accuracy.

The quality judgement, programme plan, external review, annual monitoring outcomes and public information are submitted to the Board of Governors, which formally determines programme quality. The university is exploring mid-cycle updates, potentially through faculty strategy reviews, to keep published information aligned with developments in its programmes.

5. Discussion: implications beyond Flanders

The Flemish experience asks how institutional responsibility for educational quality can be reconciled with public accountability. The five lessons suggest that autonomy and accountability can reinforce one another when institutions identify shortcomings, justify programme-quality judgements and act on their findings. Documentation volume is no substitute for such evidence.

These reviews examined policies and quality assurance arrangements, not causal effects on innovation, employability or future-readiness. Instead, the five lessons specify what institutions need to demonstrate: implementation of educational policy; transparent assurance responsibilities; meaningful

stakeholder involvement and independent expertise; contextual interpretation of evidence; and substantiated judgements, follow-up and public information.

The potential relevance beyond Flanders lies in the principles, not in copying procedures. A common assessment ground sets expectations while institutions determine how to meet them; independent panels assess different approaches without treating variation as deficiency. Application elsewhere depends on legislation, accreditation arrangements and the allocation of responsibility. The review cycle does not demonstrate that Flemish arrangements would work equally well abroad. In Flanders, institutional responsibility for confirming programme quality remains distinct from the statutory authority to accredit programmes.

An open approach requires clarity about shared expectations, institutional autonomy and the panel's task. The 2025–2031 framework retains trust, institutional ownership and NVAO's Appreciative Approach while clarifying aspects in light of review experience and stakeholder feedback. These clarifications cannot be applied retrospectively; they show that external quality assurance must also learn from practice.

External quality assurance can therefore support future-oriented higher education by examining how institutions develop their education, confirm programme quality and account publicly for their decisions, without prescribing their responses to change.

6. Conclusion

The 2020–2025 review cycle, conducted under the Flemish Quality Assurance System 2019–2025, documents the development of institution-owned conduct and recurring questions about implementing policy, explaining assurance criteria and responsibilities, using external perspectives, interpreting information and communicating programme quality. These are findings and implications of a thematic synthesis, not evidence that any one model makes higher education future-proof.

The Flemish experience suggests that future-oriented higher education requires more than the introduction of educational change. Institutions must also be able to examine programme quality, identify where improvement is needed and demonstrate how they act upon their findings. Independent external review can critically assess the credibility of those institution-owned arrangements without prescribing their design. Institutional autonomy and public accountability can thus reinforce one another as educational and societal needs evolve.

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