



Education Inspectorate  
*Ministry of Education, Culture and Science*

## **DEGREE PROGRAMME COMMITTEES 2016**

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## Summary

This report contains the outcomes of the study by the Netherlands' Inspectorate of Education into degree programme committees in government-funded higher education. We investigated how degree programme committees are currently functioning and how they might contribute more actively to the quality of degree programmes. We also compared the results with those of the Inspectorate's 2010 study into degree programme committees (Netherlands' Inspectorate of Education, 2010).

The study sheds light on the state of degree programme committees in view of the implementation of the Enhanced Governance Powers (Higher Education) Act (WVB), which will come into effect on 1 September 2017. From that time on, the central task of degree programme committees will be to advise degree programmes on improving and maintaining their quality. Moreover, in addition to their right to be consulted they will also have a right of approval with regard to parts of the Teaching and Examination Regulations (OER). In view of this, the present report also offers specific suggestions to degree programme committees for further developing themselves in these directions.

### Research methods

We have used various research methods: questionnaires for degree programme committee members (students and lecturers), for programme directors and for students and lecturers who are not members of a degree programme committee; round-table talks; a meeting with members of assessment panels; talks with experts and degree programme committees; and a work conference for degree programme committees. We also invited degree programme committees to write 'self-portraits'. Over the course of the discussions and from the self-portraits we gleaned best practices, which have in part been included in this report.

### Conclusions

As in 2010, most degree programme committees in higher education function satisfactorily, i.e. in line with present legislation. They meet the requirements for their composition and carry out the tasks laid out in the Higher Education and Research Act (WHW): they provide advice on the OER, its implementation and other education-related matters. They have taken on a somewhat more active role since 2010. Generally speaking, the degree programme committees are satisfied about the use that is made of their recommendations, although they would wish to have more responses from the management with arguments provided. They would also like to have more time for their advisory work and want to be involved at an earlier stage. Coordination with other bodies, and with the representative advisory body in particular, could also be improved. There is room for further improving the process, then, especially in view of the WVB. Programme managers have an important coordinating role here.

All in all, degree programme committees are fairly positive about their own performance. Yet, on average they only dedicate little time to their activities, which would seem to have an adverse effect on aspects such as quality assurance, training for committee members and contact with the field. This is reflected in the verdict on facilitation, which improved somewhat since 2010 but is still not always up to standard. Above all, degree programme committees would want to have greater management support in reaching out to the field. It must be noted here that different degree programme committees have different requests with regard to facilitation, which remains a matter of customised solutions.

A number of issues stand out:

- Very occasionally and contrary to legal requirements, a degree programme has no degree programme committee at all for a time. This can be seen relatively frequently in higher professional education, where ten percent of degree programmes did not have a functioning committee for at least half a year in the past three years. The degree programmes concerned cannot be identified on the basis of this study.
- Also, the number of student vacancies is relatively high in higher professional education. Moreover, there is limited enthusiasm in committee membership among lecturers both in higher professional education and in academic higher education.
- Degree programme committees do not always know exactly how to go about their tasks, both with regard to interpreting the law and deciding which tasks are properly theirs and which are the responsibility of other bodies within the degree programme. In part for this

reason, the committees contribute less fully to the programme's quality than might be the case.

- There are large differences between individual committees, often within a single institution as well. These differences are partly related to the varying contexts within which the committees operate. However, levels of ambition also seem to vary strongly: while some committees issue many recommendations and dedicate a lot of time to this, others restrict themselves to a single recommendation per year, investing a few hours per month. Some of the committees can therefore be characterised as passive and displaying little ambition.

### **Recommendations**

We have formulated a number of recommendations for the degree programme committees, the board/management and two umbrella organisations: the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (VH) and the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU).

#### *Recommendations to the degree programme committees*

1. Make sure that tasks and their demarcations are clear.
2. Formulate your own priorities for improving the quality of the degree programme.
3. Be visible: actively seek out contact with the field.
4. Opt for a balanced composition that ensures independence.
5. Coordinate with other bodies.

#### *Recommendations to the board/management*

6. Set up a degree programme committee for each degree programme.
7. Strengthen the position of the degree programme committee.
8. Ensure effective coordination with regard to quality assurance.
9. Offer customised facilities to the degree programme committee.

#### *Recommendations to the umbrella organisations VH and VSNU*

10. Enable knowledge sharing and the exchange of good examples.

### **Decision**

In the main, the functioning of degree programme committees has not changed materially since the last study, carried out in 2010 (Netherlands' Inspectorate of Education, 2010). For its part, that study concluded little had changed since the 1999 SCO-Kohnstamm study into degree programme committees (Haanstra and Voorthuis, 1999). Notwithstanding, suggestions for improvement were offered both in 1999 and in 2010. It is clear that stepping up the game would be welcome, especially in the case of the less ambitious degree programme committees. This is even more pertinent with the WVB in view: after all, the act will give degree programme committees a more prominent position with regard to quality assurance for degree programmes.

It is up to both the committees themselves and the board/management to take up the recommendations and prepare for this important change. The conclusions of this report include an overview of the current state of affairs with regard to a number of important issues. This overview can help degree programme committees take stock of their current situation, including as compared with other degree programme committees. Four or five years from now, when degree programme committees will have gained experience with the new legislation, the Inspectorate will again assess their performance. In the meantime, we will use presentations and discussions to encourage the committees to continue developing. If monitoring should show that a degree programme does not have a degree programme committee at all, we will take steps to ensure legislation is complied with.

## **8 Conclusions and recommendations**

How do degree programme committees perform in government-funded higher education and how can they contribute more actively to the quality of degree programmes? The present report aims to answer these questions. We have looked at the organisation and composition of the committees, their performance in the light of legal requirements and their influence, their relationship with the field, their cooperation with other bodies, the time invested, facilities provided and their own judgement about their functioning and organisational culture.

In this chapter we present our conclusions (paragraph 8.1). We do so from an overarching perspective so as to identify the interrelationships between the various subjects from this report. On the basis of our conclusions, we formulate a number of recommendations for degree programme committees, the board/management and umbrella organisations VH and VSNU. These are intended as aids for enhancing committees' contributions to the quality of degree programmes (paragraph 8.2). Lastly we summarise our key findings in an overview of the current state of affairs (paragraph 8.3). This overview can help degree programme committees identify where they are at this point in time, including as compared to other degree programme committees, and use this insight to formulate priorities for their continued development.

### **8.1 Conclusions**

#### *Degree programme committees usually function satisfactorily*

As in 2010, most degree programme committees in higher education function satisfactorily. In this context, 'satisfactorily' means they comply with current legal requirements: their composition is as prescribed and they carry out the tasks formulated in the WHW. They provide recommendations with regard to the OER in general as well as about subjects such as the curriculum and assessment, which – even if often not labelled as such – are part of the implementation of the OER. They also provide recommendations about other education-related issues, such as student supervision.

Remarkably, while degree programme committees do carry out their legal obligations, they do not always know how to do so in a given situation. This concerns both the interpretation of the law and deciding which tasks are properly theirs and which are the responsibility of other bodies within their institution. Partly because of this, degree programme committees do not contribute as much to the quality of the degree programme as could be the case. It is important for sound agreements to be reached internally on job roles and their demarcations.

#### *Areas of concern: visibility and enthusiasm*

Contrary to legal requirements, degree programmes sometimes go a period without a degree programme committee. This happened relatively often in higher professional education in the last three years: 10 per cent of degree programmes temporarily did not have a degree programme committee. Where this is still the case, there is a challenge to be met. The degree programmes concerned have not been identified in the study, nor does the Inspectorate take an enforcement approach as yet.

A related problem is the large number of student vacancies both in higher professional education and in academic higher education, coupled with the fact that there is often little awareness of the degree programme committee among students. If they do know they is one, they hardly feel represented by it. Lecturers, too, tend to show little enthusiasm to join the degree programme committee. The task ahead, then, is to make degree programme committees both more visible and more appealing.

#### *Many recommendations and sufficient influence, but process can be improved*

In the past years, degree programme committees have become somewhat more active: on average they issued more recommendations than in 2010, although back then a trend towards a more active advisory role could already be discerned. Generally speaking, the committees are satisfied about the follow-up to their recommendations, although they would wish to have more responses from the management with arguments provided. They would also like to have more time for advisory activities and want to be involved in the process at an earlier stage. Aside from this, they consider their cooperation with the degree programme director to be positive. This offers opportunities to further strengthen the advisory process, which is not always up to standard yet.

#### *Lack of cooperation with other bodies*

Degree programme committees do not cooperate much with other bodies within their institutions. Especially their contacts with the representative advisory body are a point of concern. More intensive cooperation would be advisable to address the lack of a clear demarcation of tasks, and would make it possible to harmonise the respective advisory roles. Once the WVB is introduced, this issue will become even more prominent: the degree programme committee and the representative advisory body will both have a right of approval with respect to the OER, even if on different elements. A clear distribution of tasks and good communication will lead to a practicable situation.

The contact with the board is another matter of concern. By demonstrating awareness of the importance of the degree programme committee, the board can strengthen the committee's position and also make it more attractive to prospective members.

#### *Little time for activities*

All in all, degree programme committees are fairly positive about their own performance. Still, on average they dedicate only little time to their activities, and the available time is being reduced further. This begs the question to what extent degree programme committees actually have reason to feel satisfied: are they really able to carry out their tasks not just satisfactorily, but really *well*? At present, there often seems to be little time for things such as quality assurance, training and contact with the field. This is reflected in the verdict on facilitation: there has been a slight improvement since 2010, but facilities are still not always up to standard. Above all, degree programme committees wish to have more support in reaching out to the field.

#### *Organisational culture mostly favourable*

Even though conditions are not invariably good for each degree programme committee, in the experience of most members and degree programme managers the organisational culture is conducive to the functioning of the degree programme committee. In a favourable organisational culture, degree programme committees have every opportunity to create a profile for themselves. Where such a culture is lacking, they often experience an excess of bureaucracy. This will remain an area of concern after the introduction of the WVB: degree programme committees expect it will give them a greater say and more influence, while at the same time fearing an increase in bureaucracy.

#### *Large differences between degree programme committees*

Remarkably, there is great diversity among degree programme committees and often within the same institution as well. In part, this diversity is due to the varying contexts within which degree programme committees operate. Each degree programme requires a different approach and it is right for degree programme committees to tailor their approach to the programme. In view of these differing contexts it is logical that not all committees require the same facilities to the same extent. Facilitation is a custom job, it emerges.

All the same, there are also undesired differences related to varying levels of ambition. These differences are expressed in the number of recommendations issued by committees, their role with regard to quality assurance and the time they invest in their activities. The ambiguity about the tasks of the committees and about the demarcation of responsibilities could be of influence here. Tellingly, members who dedicate little time to their activities and formulate few recommendations are, on average, almost equally satisfied about their own performance as are members who invest considerable time and take an active advisory role. Some of the committees can therefore be characterised as passive and displaying little ambition.

#### *Change needed now*

In the main, the functioning of degree programme committees has not changed substantially since the last study from 2010. That study in turn concluded that little had changed since the 1999 SCO-Kohnstamm study (Haanstra and Voorthuis, 1999; Netherlands' Inspectorate of Education, 2010). This suggests that the picture has remained similar throughout the years, although clear recommendations for improvement were indicated in previous studies as well. Indeed, many of those recommendations return in the present report.

It is clear that stepping up the game would be welcome, especially in the case of the less ambitious and more complacent degree programme committees. This is even more pertinent now that implementation of the WVB is in view: after all, the act will give degree programme committees the central task of providing advice to improve and maintain the quality of degree programmes. It is up to both the committees themselves and the management to address the areas of concern and prepare for this important change.

### *Follow-up*

In four or five years, when degree programme committees will have gained sufficient experience with the WVB, the Inspectorate will again examine their performance. In the meantime, we will use presentations and discussions to encourage the committees to continue developing. If monitoring should show that a degree programme does not have a degree programme committee at all, we will take steps to ensure compliance with legislation. It is expected, however, that the number of degree programmes without a degree programme committee will go down, as the sense of urgency around the introduction of the WVB is highly likely to increase.

## **8.2 Recommendations**

This study's conclusions make it clear that there are opportunities for improvement in several areas. With the recommendations in this paragraph, intended for degree programme committees themselves (1 to 5), for the board/management (6 to 9) and for umbrella organisations VH and VSNU (10), we answer the second part of our research question: how can degree programme committees contribute more actively to the quality of a degree programme?

### *Recommendations to the degree programme committees*

- 1. Make sure that tasks and their demarcations are clear.**  
Discuss a clear distribution of roles with the management, the quality assurance department and other committees and record it in a set of house rules (which will be mandatory following the introduction of the WVB). Arrange for coaching to keep to your assigned tasks.
- 2. Formulate your own priorities for improving the quality of the degree programme.**  
This attests to an active, ambitious and independent attitude on the part of degree programme committees: rather than awaiting the management's request for advice, formulate priorities proactively. Record these priorities, for instance in an annual plan, and monitor progress, e.g. through assessment in your own annual report. Such an annual report can also be used to inform the field about achievements.
- 3. Be visible: actively seek contact with the field.**  
Having intensive contact with the students and lecturers of the degree programme will make it possible to place the right items on the agenda. A recommendation will also receive more consideration if it has emphatically been formulated on behalf of the field. Furthermore, a visible degree programme committee is more attractive to prospective members.
- 4. Opt for a balanced composition that ensures independence.**  
Independence is not just expressed in the degree programme committee formulating its own priorities, but also in the balanced composition of its members, i.e. students from different years and lecturers who are keen to discuss the entire education process. The programme director is not a member of the degree programme committee, but can attend a limited number of meetings as an invitee.
- 5. Coordinate with other bodies.**  
An effective degree programme committee actively seeks out collaboration with other bodies such as the management, the examinations board, curriculum committees and the quality assurance department. Make agreements with each other, for instance on issuing specific advice, to gather the right information and to engage the persons who are in a position to follow up on the recommendations.

### *Recommendations to the board/management*

- 6. Set up a degree programme committee for each degree programme.**  
It is crucial that each degree programme have a degree programme committee; this is a legal requirement for a reason. Be critical when there is no degree programme committee and set one up as soon as possible. This could be a committee for more than one degree programme.
- 7. Strengthen the position of the degree programme committee.**  
A properly functioning degree programme committee is an essential element of a culture of quality. Create a culture in which the committee is taken seriously. A self-evident part of

this is proper feedback following a recommendation. Project the importance of the committee, so this is clear to the field as well. This includes highlighting successes achieved in part thanks to well-functioning degree programme committees, and refusing to accept a passive attitude on the part of other degree programme committees.

**8. Ensure effective coordination with regard to quality assurance.**

Ensure that all of the different actors involved in a specific theme (e.g. the degree programme committee, the examinations board, the curriculum committee and the representative advisory body) are aware what is expected of them at which stage. Facilitate this by making a transparent annual plan in which the advisory process is clear to everyone. Also make the relevant management information, including accessible, analysed course evaluations, available to degree programme committees. Ensure that everyone receives this information in time and is given enough time to formulate a recommendation.

**9. Offer the degree programme committee the facilities it needs.**

Ensure good facilities are in place: sufficient time and support, such as an administrative office, conference facilities, training opportunities and access to classes and other meetings at which the degree programme committee can reach out to the field. Keep the specific context of the degree programme and the degree programme committee in mind.

*Recommendations to umbrella organisations VH and VSNU*

**10. Enable knowledge sharing and the exchange of good examples.**

Practice shows that degree programme committees can learn much from each other's experiences. The umbrella organisations can play an important role in this respect.

These recommendations are largely based on the best practices we gathered in the course of discussions with degree programme committees and programme managers. Knowledge sharing is highly desirable: degree programme committees can learn a lot from each other and also want to. Consequently, the final recommendation revolves around knowledge sharing. The experiences of several degree programme committees have been brought together at [www.opleidingscommissies.nl](http://www.opleidingscommissies.nl). Here, the committees themselves show which approach was right for them to enhance their role in the degree programme's quality assurance, and they are happy for other degree programme committees to benefit from their own experiences.

### **8.3 Overview of state of affairs in 2016**

In this report we present many results. So as to apply focus to this abundance of data, we have summarised a number of key findings in an overview (Table 8.3a). This overview can help degree programme committees, programme directors and boards to analyse their own situation, including as compared with other degree programme committees, and to continue developing the degree programme committee. The table is incomplete, but from a perspective of practical relevance it maps the committees' main tasks, activities and options for facilitation.

Emphatically, the data in the overview are not prescriptive: they show the current state of affairs on the basis of answers provided by degree programme committee members, without including the context and data assessment as found earlier in the report. The percentages, therefore, only indicate how many degree programme committees fall into a given category. The numbers provided are averages – in practice there are many outliers – and carry no implications of ideal numbers. It is up to degree programme committees themselves to formulate their own ambitions and priorities on the basis of this data, and to initiate discussions with the board and management about the preconditions for effective functioning: sufficient facilities, a strong position and adequate process control on the part of the management with regard to subjects such as the OER and curriculum innovation.

As degree programme committees go about formulating their own ambitions and priorities, the WVB will doubtlessly play an important role. This involves issues such as the right of approval to parts of the OER, the question of whether elections should be held and, if so, how they should be organised, the house rules and consultations with the board. Of course, the overview does not include data about these future developments. In spite of this limitation, we hope it will prove to be a useful starting point for a discussion about the functioning and the ambitions of degree programme committees.

Table 8.3a Overview of the state of affairs of degree programme committees in 2016

		Higher professional education	Academic higher education
<b>Tasks and influence</b>			
1.	Number of solicited recommendations issued by the degree programme committee in 2015/2016	5	8
2.	Number of unsolicited recommendations issued by the degree programme committee in 2015/2016	6	7
3.	My degree programme committee gives recommendations on the draft OER	92%	93%
4.	My degree programme committee gives recommendations on quality assurance	66%	73%
5.	My degree programme committee gives recommendations on the quality of lecturers	46%	69%
6.	My degree programme committee always receives a substantiated response to its recommendations	13%	14%
7.	My degree programme committee has an annual plan	43%	41%
<b>Contact with the field</b>			
8.	My degree programme committee keeps students informed about its activities in ways additional to informal contacts	63%	63%
9.	My degree programme committee keeps lecturers informed about its activities in ways additional to informal contacts	78%	75%
10.	Students are aware that the degree programme has a degree programme committee	49%	61%
<b>Cooperation with other parties</b>			
11.	Number of times a year my degree programme committee meets with the programme director	2.5	4.2
12.	Number of times a year my degree programme committee meets with the representative advisory body	1.4	2.0
13.	Number of times a year my degree programme committee meets with other degree programme committees at my institution	1.0	1.4
14.	My degree programme committee usually or always receives all of the information it needs to carry out its tasks	55%	66%
15.	My degree programme committee is usually or always informed in a timely manner	40%	53%
<b>Facilitation</b>			
16.	The average number of hours per month student members of the degree programme committee dedicate to their activities on the committee	7	6
17.	The average number of hours per month lecturer members of the degree programme committee dedicate to their activities on the committee	5	8
18.	My degree programme committee has sufficient training opportunities	48%	37%
19.	My degree programme committee gets sufficient administrative support	23%	54%

## 9 Reflection

Nothing new under the sun? The performance of degree programme committees in 2016 was not materially different from their performance in 2010 or in 1999. Consequently, our recommendations largely overlap those from 2010. Is it actually useful to press for continued development in this way? The answer is: yes. Circumstances are changing, with more and more attention being paid to the culture of quality in higher education. At the same time, the introduction of the WVB will trigger some important structural changes. Both developments underscore the growing importance of an effective degree programme committee. It seems the time is ripe to get serious about seizing the opportunities that are presenting themselves.

In this final, reflective chapter we discuss the current trend with regard to the culture of quality (paragraph 9.1) and structural changes that will come with the WVB, specifically in relation to this culture of quality (paragraph 9.2).

### 9.1 More attention for the culture of quality

Higher education institutions are paying increasing attention to the culture of quality. Following the Education Council of the Netherlands, we define a culture of quality as 'a culture encouraging all those involved, both internally and externally, to focus continuously on defining and achieving the desired quality and, through a critical and constructive attitude, to aspire to any necessary improvements in quality' (Education Council of the Netherlands, 2015). According to the Council, a culture of quality at the degree programme level is key to contributing to quality improvement. It is also an important theme in the reform of the accreditation system that will soon be taken in hand. What role does the degree programme committee have here? And to what extent has this culture of quality already come into being?

#### *Recommendation of the Education Council of the Netherlands*

In its report *Quality in higher education* (Kwaliteit in het hoger onderwijs, 2015), the Education Council of the Netherlands makes the following recommendation:

#### **Work towards a stronger culture of quality at the degree programme level**

It is especially at the degree programme level that a culture of quality contributes to quality improvement. Crucially, this requires that the degree programme formulate, and bear out consistently, a shared vision of education. This vision can serve as the basis for formulating objectives that guide quality improvement. To promote a strong culture of quality, the Council also calls attention to promoting student participation and community-building, strengthening leadership at the degree programme level and organising critical reflection and feedback.

The main feature of a culture of quality is that institutions continually seek to further improve the quality of education. The degree programme committee is one of the instruments that can be engaged to this end; an instrument that will only have a stronger position once the WVB is introduced.

Institutions that believe in a culture of quality would do well, then, to reflect carefully on the positioning of their degree programme committee. To that end they should focus in particular on the last part of the Council's recommendation: after all, the programme committee members are close to their degree programme and from this position encourage student participation and a sense of community. Moreover, they are able to reflect critically and provide the management with feedback.

The Council's recommendation was received positively. A growing number of executives and managers show their appreciation of critical feedback from degree programme committees. This was evident, for example, at the conference on degree programme committees organised by the Inspectorate on 4 November 2016, at which boards were also represented. Three executives gave a workshop on the positioning of the degree programme committee. They emphasised that they valued the critical feedback from degree programme committees and that for this reason they positioned and facilitated them well, each committee within the context of its own institution.

#### *Renewing the accreditation system*

In the discussions about renewing the accreditation system, the subject of the culture of quality within the degree programme also comes to the fore. The new accreditation system is to strengthen professionals' ownership of, and the responsibility of institutions for, their own quality assurance. Among the ways this is expressed is the greater role of the degree programme – and so

of the professional – in the composition of the assessment panel. The degree programme is expected to adopt an active role in this regard, aimed at improving internal quality assurance.

On 7 October 2016, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science submitted the new Assessment Framework of the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) to Parliament (Parliamentary Papers II 2016/2017, 31 288, No. 556). This new framework enhances the position of students and the representative advisory body, and consequently of the degree programme committee. For example, a chapter by students themselves and/or a recommendation by the degree programme committee will become a part of the degree programme's self-assessment. When the assessment panel recommends that the NVAO grant the degree programme a recovery period, the programme is to consult the degree programme committee on the recovery plan.

The degree programme committee can also play a well-defined part in the further development of the accreditation system. For example, a rule is envisaged that the assessment report should also be sent to the degree programme committee so as to position the committee and increase ownership of quality and quality control. Additionally, the plan provides for the student members of degree programme committees to have a coordinating role in preparing the chapter by students in the degree programme's self-assessment. Discussing the assessment report will also be added as a task to Articles 9.18 and 10.3c of the Legislative Proposal for Customised Accreditation (*Wetsvoorstel Accreditatie op maat*, WHW, 2016).

With these adaptations the degree programme committee will also have a more important position in a formal sense within the degree programme's system of quality assurance, which will help develop the culture of quality. In other words, structure and culture will be mutually reinforcing.

#### *Current state of affairs*

To what extent is a culture of quality already embedded in degree programmes? The present study allows for a number of cautious pronouncements. We have seen that the majority of degree programme committees and degree programme managers believe the organisational culture to be 'favourable' to the functioning of the committee. We described a favourable organisational culture as a culture that gives the committee an opportunity to profile itself – in terms of facilitation, recognition and freedom to contribute ideas; a culture in which the committee is taken seriously and can contribute to the programme's quality in an open, informal atmosphere.

If we juxtapose this description with the definition of culture of quality – which was formulated from a broad organisational perspective – we see a number of important elements translated to the level of the committee. In a culture of quality, the committee is encouraged to engage itself continuously on behalf of the programme's quality by adopting a constructive and critical attitude. This attitude is nourished by an atmosphere of equality in which everyone is assured of having a voice: this is exactly the kind of favourable organisational culture we are keen to find everywhere.

#### *Outlook*

With growing attention for a culture of quality, the circumstances in which degree programme committees operate may be expected to move in the right direction in the coming years. However, this is not an automatic process: it is up to the board/management to give the committees the leeway they require to position themselves, and it is up to the committees to make use of this leeway. With their contributions they can play a key role in bringing about a strong culture of quality.

## **9.2 The structural changes that come with the WVB**

However great the effort of those involved, a culture of quality at the degree programme level, with express involvement of students and lecturers in the quality of the programme, can only really take off if supported by an effective structure for representative advisory bodies. This is what the WVB aims to achieve. When the legislative proposal was debated in Parliament, it was emphasised that apart from a change in culture, a change in structure – that is, legal provisions – is required to strengthen the functioning of degree programme committees. Which structural changes does this concern, what do they mean for the culture of quality and which challenges do they present?

#### *Tasks*

The main structural change concerns the range of responsibilities of the degree programme committee. Following the introduction of the WVB on 1 September 2017, the committee's core responsibility will be to provide recommendations for improving and maintaining quality. What is especially relevant here is that the committee will have a right of approval with respect to elements of the OER, making it a formal representative advisory body. The committee will have greater

responsibility, and it will not be possible to ignore its contributions. This will also be expressed in the (new) legal regulations stipulating that the committee should be able to meet with the board and the board should respond to a proposal from the committee within two months.

This change can have significant consequences for the committee's position, as we already saw when looking ahead at the WVB in chapter 7. We may assume that the OER will improve in quality, but also that the committee will have more status as a body with the right of approval. The degree programme committee is a body to be taken seriously – this was already the case, but will now have additional legal backing. It will gain in visibility and possibly also in appeal to prospective members who may not currently see it as the right platform due to an assumed lack of leverage. The WVB will be able to streamline the process towards installing an effective committee. The extended remit, then, seems to work to the advantage of the culture of quality in several ways.

As we saw in chapter 3, the committees currently interpret their tasks in a great variety of ways. We already mentioned that this is partly due to the different contexts in which they operate, and is therefore to be expected, but that it is also related in part to varying levels of ambition. We concluded that some committees can be characterised as passive and as having limited ambition. This will no longer be an option once the WVB is introduced, as *all* degree programme committees will have an extended remit.

#### *Composition and organisation*

The WVB will also introduce changes in terms of the composition and organisation of the committees. Firstly, it will now be a formal requirement for committees to be composed equally of students and of staff members. An over-representation of student members, as we currently see on degree programme committees in higher professional education (see chapter 2), will no longer be permitted. This measure, too, can give a quality boost: recommendations will be more balanced, the provision of information will be improved and committees themselves will have a better balance. Moreover, committees will have more leverage, which will improve their status within the programme.

A second change in this regard is a little more complex. Following the introduction of the WVB, members of degree programme committees will have to be elected and can no longer simply be appointed. This modification makes sense, as it will ensure that the members will actually represent the field. After all, we saw in chapter 4 that at the moment the field hardly feels represented by the committee. The existence of a representative advisory body is in fact legitimised by such representation.

At the moment, committee members are very rarely elected. Sometimes there is a preference for specific appointments and sometimes there are simply not enough candidates. For this reason, committees are worried about this change, as we saw in chapter 7. Will it not only get harder to find suitable members if elections are held? Many institutions are already facing low turnouts in elections for representative advisory bodies. But there are also institutions with better experiences, so here, too, degree programmes can learn from each other. In any case, it is important for the committees to reflect on the way in which they will be holding the elections.

#### *Facilitation and schooling*

The provisions on facilitation have been further specified in the WVB: degree programme committees are entitled to administrative, financial and legal support and training. A pre-established training budget also has to be available. In this way the law recognises more emphatically the importance of effective facilities for committees, which is only right in view of the extension of their remit. Many committees already need improved facilities; once the WVB is introduced there will above all be an increased need for training. We saw in chapter 7 that both members and programme managers fear that degree programme committees have too little knowledge to be able to deal with the added responsibility.

In view of this, there ought to be an added emphasis on facilitation, and training in particular, accompanying the introduction of the WVB. Training involves the professionalisation of both the committees and programme managers. There already are specific plans for this, as we learned from the interviews we held. The WVB will offer opportunities for facilitation and training, but the specifics depend on the context and will be different for each committee.

#### *Direction*

The WVB ensures a better position for the committee, but also requires members as well as the board/management to do their bit. This is not inevitably a positive development. The additional

tasks and greater responsibility could lead to more bureaucracy and formalisation, as some of those involved fear. This threatens to make the process slow and complex, especially when there is also the danger of an overlap in activities with other bodies. Precisely for this reason, the entire advisory process – especially with respect to the OER – requires disciplined guidance from the management, aimed at a clear schedule and a streamlined process.

It is important, however, that this guidance should not hamper the good relationship which committees and programme managers now enjoy in almost all cases. A good relationship offers an excellent starting point for implementing the desired changes in a pleasant and lasting way.

### **9.3 In closing**

Quite apart from all legal requirements, one thing in the end is paramount: quality education. All parties involved, including the degree programme committees, work for this every day from a variety of positions and responsibilities. When a committee performs poorly, this does not necessarily mean, of course, that the quality of education is poor. However, we would be justified to assume that there is room for improvement in education. The committee offers possibilities to the degree programme to improve the quality of education through sound recommendations made by students and lecturers, based on their own daily experience and input from the field.

In the time to come, will committees take the step from functioning 'satisfactorily' to functioning 'well'? Current developments are a cause for optimism, but there is work to be done. It is of great importance that by the start of 2017 at the latest, committees have a clear grasp of their role following implementation of the WVB and are aware which adjustments are needed to carry out that role properly. With this in mind, we organised a work conference as early as November 2016 to help institutions, and degree programme committees in particular, prepare.

Fortunately, the committees do not all need to reinvent the wheel; learning from each other's experiences can accelerate developments. We have included some of these experiences in this report, while the rest can be found at [www.opleidingscommissies.nl](http://www.opleidingscommissies.nl). On the website, degree programme committees reveal their methods, share what works well for them and in this way help each other on the path towards a new role as an influential representative advisory body.