

Further Improvement

Examination boards in higher education

Summary

Research question and approach

This report by the Inspectorate answers the question of how, and to what extent, the examination boards of higher education institutions establish whether a student satisfies the intended exit qualifications, in relation to Section 7.12 of the Higher Education and Research Act (*Wet op het hoger onderwijs en wetenschappelijk onderzoek WHW*). The inquiry focuses on the tasks of the examination boards, as well as the manner in which they are performed and the position occupied by the board within the institution. For purposes of clarity, we wish to emphasise that the Inspectorate makes no statement in this report regarding the final qualification levels themselves; we are solely concerned with the role played by the examination boards in guaranteeing these levels.

To answer the research question, the Inspectorate sent questionnaires to the chairpersons of examination boards, their faculty managers and two examiners of 306 study programmes at both government-funded and non-government-funded research universities and universities of applied sciences. We also conducted in-depth interviews at six institutions, held round-table discussions with 201 participants, analysed the examination boards' annual reports, interviewed experts and reviewed the literature and accreditation decisions by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO).

The research method allows representative statements to be made about government-funded higher professional education and research-oriented education, and about non-funded higher professional education. Where relevant, we draw this distinction in the research findings.

Conclusions

There have been clear improvements among the examination boards since the Inspectorate's 2008¹ report titled 'Bookkeeper or watchful eye?' (*Boekhouder of wakend oog?*). They are more focused than before on assuring the quality of both interim and final examinations, thereby increasing their ability to guarantee the value of the diplomas they issue. Examination boards have also become more independent: their members include far fewer managers than before. The expertise of examination boards has also increased, as the boards have taken part in numerous professional development activities in the field of test quality and legal knowledge. Universities of applied sciences in particular have made major progress in the implementation of the Improved Governance (Higher Education) Act (*Wet versterking besturing*).

The vast majority of examination boards need to continue this development process in the years ahead. This report states the percentage of the examination boards that require improvement, as well as the activities concerned. The key improvement areas are given below:

- periodic investigation of whether examinations as a whole test the required exit qualifications;
- explicit appointment of examiners;
- guidelines for the creation of examinations; and
- monitoring compliance with guidelines and regulations pertaining to fraud.

Lastly, examination boards must ensure that student complaints or requests concerning examination board members are handled in the absence of the members in question, in accordance with Section 7.12(b)(4) of the WHW.

¹ The Bookkeeper or Watchful Eye report was published in 2009, however the study itself was carried out in 2008.

The following basic conditions will help to accelerate this developmental process among examination boards:

- a clear definition of the position of the examination board and of how tasks are divided between the board and other actors within the institution;
- a shared interpretation of the legal framework; and
- adequate support.

These basic conditions require attention at the administrative level. The Inspectorate is concerned that around one third of examination boards now claim to receive inadequate (or more often inadequate than adequate) facilitative support.

In this report the Inspectorate has included a number of recommendations to all parties involved, in the form of concrete activities. Further improvement is necessary, and this need will only intensify with the expected increase in flexibility in higher education in the years to come.

Research results

The structure of examination boards

Examination boards are structured in various ways. One quarter serve a specific study programme, and three quarters cover a group of programmes. On average, each board is responsible for 1,100 students. Sixty-four per cent of boards delegate one or more of their tasks. Around one third do not do so in a traceable manner, adversely affecting the clarity of the board's role.

Quality assurance for examinations

Quality assurance of examinations by the examination boards has improved over the past few years. Examination boards, for example, now appoint examiners more often, and more examiners are given examination guidelines. At the same time, around one quarter of examination boards require further improvement. It is important for these examination boards to appoint examiners explicitly, and to supplement examiner guidelines with essential instructions on preventing fraud and creating examinations.

Quality assurance for examinations

Practically all examination boards claim to perform quality assurance tasks for examinations (or to have such tasks carried out under their responsibility). Many boards investigate the quality of the final student submissions and discuss the results of other studies in this area, both much more often than several years ago. Three quarters of examination boards study (or commission studies) of whether the series of examinations as a whole assess all of the intended exit qualifications. The remaining quarter of the examination boards must start to do so as well.

Decisions on individual students

The examination boards' responsibility to take decisions regarding individual students is being fulfilled to a sufficient standard. In accordance with statutory provisions, examination boards issue exemptions to individual students based on criteria set out in the Teaching and Examination Regulations, and also impose sanctions in confirmed cases of fraud. Ninety-four per cent of study programmes also have regulations or guidelines that examiners must apply in suspected cases of fraud. Examination boards process student requests and complaints in accordance with their statutory obligations.

However, we conclude that some areas do require improvement, such as communication between the examination board and students/examiners concerning regulations and decisions. Also, examination boards that do not yet do so (8%) must ensure that complaints concerning one of their members are handled in the absence of the member in question.

Expertise

The Inspectorate has concluded that the expertise present in examination boards is developing in a positive direction. The majority of examiners and management members believe that examination boards operate in an expert manner. In recent years, the knowledge present in examination boards on matters such as assessment and legislation has increased. However, it is a source of concern that over one third of examination boards report a lack of time available in which to execute their responsibilities. Furthermore, only 58% claim to receive adequate support for professional development; among examination boards at research universities, this figure is only 37%.

A major need has been reported to share experiences with boards at other institutions. Examination boards have expressed a willingness to share the practices that work well within their own context. At the end of this report (after Section 5) we have included such 'good practices', and we call on institutions and/or umbrella organisations to add to this list.

Independence

All parties believe that the examination boards operate independently and include very few members with financial responsibility. We have seen the number of managers in examination boards decline in recent years. However, we do note that the concepts of 'independence' and 'persons with financial responsibility' cover grey areas and call for more precise definition within individual institutions.

Transparency

Several years ago, examination boards still only reported to a limited extent on their activities. All examination boards now issue an annual report, which represents a major step forward. Transparency can still be further improved, however: the exact division of responsibilities and tasks is still frequently unclear. In addition, communication between examination boards and the executive board regarding the annual report is often too limited; many examination boards (up to three quarters in research-oriented education) receive no response from their executive board on the content of their annual report.

In conclusion

Examination boards have made important progress in recent years concerning quality assurance of interim and final examinations, aided by both the Improved Governance (Higher Education) Act and the modified accreditation system. The Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences and the Dutch Council for Training and Education (NRTO) have developed activities that support examination boards in their development. The boards have demonstrated considerable effort, as evinced by their commitment to this inquiry and their willingness to share good practices. In the years ahead, examination boards should use self-evaluations to further improve their assurance of final qualification levels.

The Inspectorate plans to investigate the examination boards' performance again in a few years' time. We are also considering devoting several publications to specific aspects of the boards' performance in the period ahead.

1 Conclusions, analysis and recommendations

1.1 Conclusion and analysis: progress is evident, but further improvement is required

Examination boards are charged with the statutory task of determining in an objective and professional manner whether students satisfy the requirements set by the Teaching and Examination Regulations regarding the knowledge, understanding and skills necessary for being awarded a degree. This report focuses on the manner and extent to which examination boards in higher education fulfil this statutory task.

The Inspectorate can conclude that the examination boards are becoming increasingly successful in fulfilling their statutory mandate. Since the inquiry in 2008, examination boards have made positive progress, increasing their ability to guarantee the value of the diplomas they issue. Examination boards are focusing more and more on their quality assurance tasks, and show increasing levels of independence and expertise compared with several years ago. Universities of applied sciences in particular have made significant progress on the implementation of the Improved Governance (Higher Education) Act (*Wet versterking besturing*).

The majority of examination boards in higher education, however, have not yet concluded their development in this respect. We advise the examination boards and all parties involved (the institutional management in particular) to raise their efforts towards further development.

Progress

Through participation in professional development activities in recent years, examination boards have succeeded in increasing their assessment expertise and knowledge of the statutory frameworks. They are also perceived as being independent. A contributing factor to this independence is the fact that no persons with financial responsibility are appointed as members of examinations boards, in accordance with the Higher Education and Research Act (WHW), Section 7.12(a)(3). Although this regulation had not yet come into force during the time of the inquiry, in the spring of 2014 respondents nonetheless stated that no persons with financial responsibility occupied positions on examinations boards. We have also noticed a drop in the number of faculty managers on examination boards compared to several years ago.

Examination boards are increasingly able to guarantee the value of the diplomas they issue, and are focusing more and more on their quality assurance role. Practically all examiners have been appointed, and they also receive examination guidelines. The majority of examination boards spot-check students' final assignment submissions and other examinations to monitor examination quality.

To help with quality assurance of interim and final examinations, we have produced a summary of the core tasks of examination boards (Table 5.1a). The importance of these tasks has been outlined in the sections above. We have observed that most examination boards perform these tasks (with the exception of one task).

Table 5.1a: Performance (or commissioning) of core tasks (in percentages; no. of examination boards = 281)

Core tasks	
Periodic verification of whether examinations as a whole test the required exit qualifications	74
Periodic verification of the quality of final student assignments	88
Periodic verification of the quality of non-final examinations	89
Examiners receive guidelines for the creation of examinations	68
Examiners receive guidelines for the administration of examinations	85
Examiners receive guidelines for the assessment of examinations and determining results	81
Monitoring compliance with guidelines	86
Appointment of examiners for a specific component of the study programme	69
Establishing a procedure to be followed by examiners in suspected cases of fraud	94
Investigation in 2012/2013 as to whether examiners act in accordance with the guidelines and regulations pertaining to fraud	40

Source: Inspectorate of Education, 2015

Improvement areas

Although the majority of examination boards perform the core tasks listed in Table 5.1a, some boards do not yet carry out all core tasks. Based on the table, we identify the following areas for improvement:

- periodic investigation of whether examinations as a whole test the required exit qualifications;
- explicit appointment of examiners;
- guidelines for the creation of examinations; and
- monitoring compliance with guidelines and regulations pertaining to fraud.

Lastly, examination boards that do not yet do so (8%) must ensure that student complaints or requests concerning examination board members are handled in the absence of the member(s) in question, in accordance with Section 7.12(b)(4) of the WHW.

In order to be fully clear, we wish to repeat that the Inspectorate makes no statement in this report regarding the final qualification levels themselves; the desired improvements exclusively concern the role of the examination boards in guaranteeing these levels.

Development process

Our overall conclusion is that most examination boards have not yet completed this development process. During our on-site inspections, we noticed that examination boards pursued a range of developmental strategies that were compatible with existing practices and expertise within the faculty. In doing so, examination boards concentrated on different tasks, producing major differences between examination boards – even within the same institution.

We identified a number of common patterns:

- Boards often look first at the quality of individual examinations, and only afterwards at the examinations as a whole;
- Boards often look first at the quality of several major examinations that test knowledge, and only afterwards at the examinations that test skills and attitudes;
- Boards often look first at the quality of examinations that test exit competencies, and only afterwards at the examinations testing other programme components;
- Boards often look first at the exam administration and assessment guidelines, and only afterwards at exam construction guidelines;
- Boards often look first at the formulation and implementation of guidelines, then at the monitoring of guidelines;
- Boards often take their own expertise or a number of good practices as their point of departure; only later do they expand their methods by sharing expertise with other examination boards within the institution.

1.2 Prerequisites for the development process

Examination boards are increasingly ensuring the quality of interim and final examinations, and have taken major developmental steps. The rate of this development depends on a number of prerequisites, namely: 1. a clear position and division of tasks within the institution; 2. a uniform interpretation of the statutory framework; and 3. adequate facilitative support. Satisfying these prerequisites is necessary in order to speed up the development process.

Prerequisite No. 1: a clear and transparent position

It is the responsibility of the executive board to ensure that both the position of examination boards and the division of tasks among actors within the institution (examiners, management and executive board) are clearly defined. The exact agreements concerning the division of tasks will vary according to the institutional context.

There are three issues in particular that require clarification where relevant. Firstly, the division of responsibilities between the executive board, managers and examination boards in relation to (a) the examiners and (b) examination regulations; Secondly, the allocation of authorisations and tasks in cases of delegation by the examination board – clarity is required on how the examination board fulfils its responsibilities through delegated tasks; Thirdly, the importance of transparency and communication: examiners, students and managers must be aware of the examination board's procedures and authorisations.

It is the responsibility of the executive board to ensure the independent performance of the examination board (Section 7.12(a)(2) of the WHW), in which the examination board's annual report must play a contributing role. Many examination boards (three quarters of those at research universities) receive no feedback on their annual report from the executive board. Executive boards therefore also have a task in this regard: by responding to the annual report, they underline the importance of ensuring the quality of exit qualifications, and acknowledge the crucial role played therein by examination boards.

Precondition No. 2: a uniform interpretation of the legal framework

Many examination boards find it difficult to interpret certain sections of the legal framework. Four issues in particular stand out in this respect.

Firstly, the question of whether examination boards may deny a student a certificate if they believe that student has been incorrectly awarded a satisfactory grade by an examiner, for instance for a final thesis. Secondly, examination boards are unsure of how to interpret the section of the Act concerning investigations that examination boards may conduct into students' knowledge, understanding and skills (WHW, Section 7.10(2)). This section is unknown to most examination boards, and is rarely ever invoked.

Thirdly, the question of whether an examination board may declare an examination invalid. For example, is this permitted under WHW Section 7.12(b)(a), which allocates the task of ensuring the quality of examinations to examination boards? Lastly, some examination boards wonder whether they are authorised in certain situations to retract the appointment of a particular examiner. In fact they do have that authority, provided the examiner has been given the opportunity to improve on his/her exams. Precedents for retracting such an appointment (and other precedents) are unknown to many examination boards.

Precondition No. 3: adequate support

Adequate support is the third precondition for expediting examination boards' developmental process. Over one third of examination boards claim to have too little time to perform their duties. Only 58% report adequate facilitative support for professional development; among examination boards at research universities, this figure is only 37%.

Most examination boards report difficulty with striking a balance between handling individual cases and performing tasks of a more long-term nature, i.e. those related to quality assurance and policy. This is certainly the case among examination boards (over half) that also perform tasks allocated to them by their institutions that are supplementary to those outlined in the Higher Education and Research Act. These often include decisions concerning binding recommendations regarding the continuation of studies, or student admissions. Such tasks are very labour-intensive, and require adequate support.

1.3 Conclusion

Examination boards are currently undergoing complex developmental changes. Recent years have seen significant progress: most examination boards perform the core quality-assurance tasks for interim and other examinations, with particular improvements noticeable among universities of applied sciences. The Inspectorate wishes to emphasise that additional measures are necessary in order to expedite this developmental process. Important aspects include a clarification of the examination boards' position and the division of roles, a common interpretation of the statutory framework, and adequate time and financial resources to be made available to examination boards. The recommendations outlined in the following section address these aspects.

There is a great need to share experiences with boards from other institutions. To facilitate this process, we have included a list of good practices at the end of this report. Examination boards have reported success with these practices within their own contexts, as well as a willingness to share them with other examination boards.

Further improvement is necessary. The plans for increased flexibility within higher education will only intensify this need, as examination boards will need to make even more decisions on individual cases than they do now. The Inspectorate plans to investigate the examination boards' performance again in a few years' time. and will

devote attention to certain specific aspects of their performance in a number of special publications in the months ahead.

1.4 Recommendations

The Inspectorate recommends that all parties involved work on further improving the performance of examination boards. To do so, we offer five concrete recommendations below.

1. All relevant institutional parties must join forces to ensure a clear and transparent definition of the position of examination boards.

Examination boards must play a central role in quality assurance for interim and other examinations, aided by the following measures:

- The executive board must ensure an organisational structure and culture that recognises and acknowledges the examination board's importance;
- Examination boards, faculty management, the executive board and examiners must discuss the division of their roles and each other's authorisations, to ensure that they are demonstrably clear and transparent to everybody involved. This concerns the relationships between assessment programmes, the guidelines and the Teaching and Examination Regulations, as well as the instructions given to examiners. It is advisable to give examination boards considerable rights to be consulted on those sections of the Teaching and Examination Regulations that concern examinations;
- The executive board should use the examination boards' annual reports to enhance both the position of those boards and the quality of examinations;
- Careful consideration must be given to how, and to what extent, the examination board could delegate its tasks in a meaningful and responsible manner; wherever delegation occurs, the details must be documented in a traceable manner. Examination boards must take visible responsibility for all of their statutory obligations, and the delegation of core quality-assurance tasks must be considered in a critical light;
- The position and procedures of examination boards must be clearly documented with an organisation chart, standing orders and any applicable delegation decisions.

2. All parties involved must jointly and explicitly define the consequences of the examination boards' independence and expertise within the context of their own institution.

The concept of independence has multiple facets within this context, and implies (among other things) that persons responsible for the success rates of a study programme must not sit on examination boards. It also means that students should perceive the examination board as being independent. Examination boards must also establish an appropriate distance from the faculty, and strike a balance between independence on the one hand and subject-related (and other) expertise on the other.

The following measures may contribute to this independence and expertise:

- An explicit interpretation of the concept of 'independence' within the institution, with a clear outline of the consequences for the organisational structure (the distance between the examination board and the faculty) and for the profile of examination board members;

- An explicit interpretation of the concept of 'expertise', with a clear outline of the consequences thereof for the organisational structure (the distance between the examinations board and the faculty) and for the profile of board members;
- The executive board should ensure adequate professional development of, and continuity within, the examination board;
- Examination boards should be consulted before new members are appointed.

3. Based on a self-analysis, all examination boards should continue to pursue their development path and introduce new tasks that are still missing.

Examination boards vary greatly. On some aspects of their performance, the vast majority still fail to fulfil their quality assurance role truly effectively. To further strengthen their performance, examination boards should:

- gain an idea of where they currently stand, and create a development plan for the years ahead stating how they plan to improve;
- to the extent that they are still failing to perform some tasks, give priority to:
 - assuring the quality of final examinations: do the interim examinations as a whole cover the intended competencies?
 - assuring the quality of interim examinations through the more explicit appointment of examiners using qualitative, documented criteria (e.g. in a profile) that are brought to the attention of management and examiners, and by formulating adequate guidelines for the creation, administration and assessment of examinations;
 - taking measures to prevent fraud, and monitoring compliance with these measures;
- to the extent that they still handle student complaints concerning one of their members in the presence of the member in question, alter their procedures as soon as possible in accordance with Section 7.12(b)(4) of the WHW.

4. Executive boards must provide examination boards with adequate facilitative support.

The improvements that we have seen in examination boards over previous years can only be expedited if the examination boards are given adequate support. This can be achieved:

- by allowing examination boards enough time to perform their duties and to take part in their professional development;
- by providing the examination boards with adequate secretarial, legal and other support;
- by providing additional facilities for examination boards that perform tasks in addition to their statutory duties, such as taking decisions related to the binding recommendation concerning the continuation of studies or student admissions;
- by arranging for examination boards within institutions or between institutions to learn from each other, given that different boards (even within the same institution) are often at vastly different stages of development.

5. Institutions must work together to share knowledge and arrive at a clear interpretation of legislation.

Examination boards currently struggle to interpret certain statutory provisions. Sharing possible interpretations and their effects, as well as sharing knowledge of precedents is required for further improvement in this regard. A uniform interpretation will also provide clarity to students. There is a great need among examination boards to share good practices across institutions. This process may benefit if:

- all institutions and/or their umbrella organisations provide facilities for a nationwide network of examination boards so as to help them share experiences (including the interpretation of their own investigations as described in Section 7.10(2) of the WHW);
- Examination appeals boards inform the examination boards within their institution of the interpretation of the regulations; and
- Examination appeals boards (or their secretaries) from various institutions share knowledge with one another regarding the issues submitted to them and their interpretation of the relevant legislation.