Institutional versus Programme Accreditation: Trends in European Systems

Convergence in Rhetoric, Divergence in Practice

Don F. Westerheijden & Sanne Bakker

Don F. Westerheijden, University of Twente
Sanne Bakker, University of Twente

European systems have moved, over two decades, from programme accreditation towards institutional review, and the movement is usually described as a convergence. This article examines the trend more closely. It distinguishes four arrangements that are frequently conflated, shows that the shift is partial and reversible, and argues that the choice between institutional and programme review is determined less by evidence about effectiveness than by the distribution of authority between the state and the institution.

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1. A Trend and Its Description

A trend described as convergence

The dominant narrative of European quality assurance over the last fifteen years is a movement from the review of individual programmes to the review of institutions. The narrative is supported by real changes: several systems have replaced mandatory programme ac-

creditation with institutional audit, and several others have introduced a combination in which institutional review reduces the burden of programme-level procedures.

The description is accurate as a summary and misleading as an analysis, because it treats four distinct arrangements as one. A system may review institutions and not programmes; review programmes and not institutions; review both, with the institutional review as a condition for programme-level exemption; or review both independently, for different purposes.

This article examines the four arrangements, the reasons systems choose among them, and the evidence about their effects. Its argument is that the choice is a decision about where authority over the curriculum resides, and that the technical arguments about efficiency and burden are secondary.

2. Four Arrangements

2.1 The Typology

Arrangement	Unit of review	Distribution of authority
Programme accreditation	Each programme	State or agency decides on each programme
Institutional audit	The institution	Institution decides, agency checks the process
Combined, conditional	Institution first, then sampling	Institution decides within an approved frame
Parallel	Both, independently	Authority divided and frequently contested

Table 1 Four arrangements of external quality assurance

The first arrangement places the decision at the level of the programme, and it is the arrangement that most systems adopted in the first decade of the century. Its logic is that quality resides in a programme, that a degree certifies a defined body of learning, and that the state has an interest in what is certified.

The second places the decision at the level of the institution, and its logic is different: quality is produced by institutional processes, and an institution that can assure its own processes can be trusted with its programmes.

2.2 The Combined Arrangement

Exemption is a delegation of authority

The third arrangement is the most interesting and the least stable. An institution is reviewed, and if the review is satisfactory it acquires the right to approve its own programmes, subject to sampling by the agency.

The arrangement is attractive because it reduces the burden on the agency and on the institution, and it is unstable because it depends on a judgement that the institution's processes are adequate, which is exactly the judgement that a programme review was designed to avoid having to make.

3. Why Systems Choose

3.1 The Efficiency Argument

The argument most often made for institutional review is efficiency. A system with two hundred programmes and forty institutions can conduct forty reviews instead of two hundred, and the saving is real.

The argument has a limit that is rarely stated. A programme review produces information about a programme; an institutional review produces information about processes. The two are not substitutes, and a system that replaces the first with the second has decided that it does not need the information that the first produced.

Information	Programme review	Institutional review
Content of a curriculum	Detailed	Not examined
Assessment practice	Observable	Inferred from process
Comparability across programmes	High	Low
Capacity for self-improvement	Local and specific	Institutional
Burden per programme	High	Low

Table 2 What each arrangement produces

3.2 The Authority Argument

The choice is about who decides

The second argument is about authority, and it is the one that explains the pattern of adoption. A state that wishes to control what is taught uses programme review. A state that wishes to hold institutions ac-

countable for their own quality uses institutional review. The choice is a decision about governance, and the technical merits follow from it.

This is visible in the direction of change. Systems that moved from programme to institutional review are, in general, systems that were also increasing institutional autonomy in other respects. Systems that retained programme accreditation are, in general, systems in which the state retains a direct interest in the curriculum, frequently because it funds it directly or because professional regulation requires it.

4. What the Evidence Says

4.1 Effects on Quality

The evidence about the relative effectiveness of the two arrangements is weak, and it is weak for a structural reason: quality is produced by teaching, and neither arrangement observes teaching directly. Both observe documents, and the difference is in whose documents.

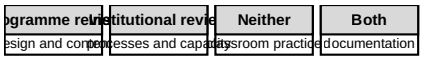

Figure 1 What each arrangement can observe

The studies that exist suggest two findings. The first is that programme review produces more specific recommendations, because it examines a defined object. The second is that institutional review produces more durable change, because it addresses the processes through which programmes are created.

4.2 Effects on Burden

The evidence on burden is stronger and it points in a clear direction. Programme accreditation is expensive for institutions, and the cost falls disproportionately on small institutions with few programmes and no dedicated quality office.

5. The Reversibility Question

Exceptions return where the state has an interest

A notable feature of the trend is that it is reversible. Several systems that adopted institutional review have reintroduced programme-level procedures for defined categories: regulated professions, teacher education, medicine, and programmes delivered in a foreign language or by a private provider.

The pattern of exceptions is informative. It follows the interest of the state and of professional bodies rather than the logic of quality. A programme that leads to a licence to practise is reviewed by the body that controls the licence; a programme that is delivered across a border attracts scrutiny that a domestic programme does not.

This suggests that the choice between arrangements is not a single decision but a set of decisions about categories, and that a system which describes itself as having moved to institutional review may in fact have a hybrid arrangement with a substantial programme-level component.

6. Implications

Three implications follow for systems that are considering a change.

The first is that the decision should be made explicitly as a decision about authority, and not presented as a technical improvement. A ministry that moves to institutional review has decided to trust institutions with their own programmes, and the decision should be defended in those terms.

The second is that the information lost should be replaced. A system that stops reviewing programmes should require institutions to publish comparable information about their programmes, or it will discover that it has traded a burden for a blind spot.

The third is that the arrangement should be evaluated after a defined period, against the information it produces and the change it induces rather than against the burden it removes.

7. What Institutional Review Cannot See

The case for institutional review rests on a claim about the object: that the capacity to assure quality is a property of the institution rather than

of each programme, and that an institution with a working internal system will produce programmes of adequate quality without an external examination of each of them. The claim is plausible and it is not the same as the claim that institutional review examines programmes.

What institutional review examines is the design of the internal system: the regulations, the committees, the procedures, the evidence that the procedures were followed, and a sample of programmes selected to test the system. The sample is the point at which the two arrangements meet, and the size and selection of the sample determine whether the review is an audit of a system or an inspection of teaching.

The selection of the sample is the whole of the method

A sample of programmes chosen by the institution demonstrates that the system works where the institution believes it works. A sample chosen by the panel, from the full list and without notice of which will be visited, tests the system where the institution has not prepared. The difference is not a matter of distrust; it is a matter of what a sample can establish.

The second thing that institutional review cannot see is the programme that is failing quietly. A system audit reads the record of complaints, appeals and withdrawal, and a programme in which students leave without complaining produces a clean record. Programme review, conducted by a panel that reads the assessed work and speaks to the students, is the arrangement that finds the difficulty, and it finds it because it looks at the teaching rather than at the system that is meant to monitor it.

8. The Cost of Running Two Systems

The shift from programme to institutional review is usually justified by burden, and the justification understates the cost of the transition. For the period in which the new arrangement is being introduced, both systems operate: the institution prepares for an institutional review while continuing to submit programmes to external accreditation, and the two preparations draw on the same small group of people.

The transition is where the burden is highest

The cost is not only administrative. A programme that is preparing for an external accreditation writes a self-evaluation document for an audience that will read it once, and the document is written to satisfy a template rather than to describe a problem. An institution that is simultaneously preparing an institutional review writes a second document, for a different template, describing the same practice in different words. The duplication is visible to everyone involved and it is rarely counted in the burden estimates that accompany the reform.

The second cost is the loss of the programme-level evidence that programme review used to generate. An institutional review produces a judgement about a system and a sample of findings; programme accreditation produced a decision about each programme, and the decisions accumulated into a map of where quality was weak. A system that moves to institutional review without maintaining the map loses a form of knowledge that it will need when a problem appears in a field that the sample did not visit.

The remedy is a register rather than a procedure. An institution that maintains a public register of programme-level outcomes — completion, satisfaction, external examiner reports, the changes made in response — produces the map without an external panel for each programme, and the register is available to the institutional review as evidence. The cost is a data system and the discipline of publication, and it is smaller than the cost of running two review systems at once.

9. Reversal: How and Why Systems Move Back

The movement towards institutional review is described as a trend, and trends in higher education policy are frequently read as one-way. The evidence does not support the reading: several systems that adopted institutional review have reintroduced a programme-level element, and the reintroductions share a pattern.

The first trigger is a public failure. A programme that produces graduates who cannot practise, or a professional field in which an employer or a regulator loses confidence, creates a demand for a decision about programmes rather than about institutions. The response is usually a targeted programme review for the affected field, and the targeted review tends to expand, because the fields that are not covered ask why they are not.

A reversal is usually a targeted exception that grows

The second trigger is a professional regulator. Where a profession has its own accreditation, the institutional review cannot substitute for it, and the coexistence of the two arrangements produces the duplication described above. The systems that manage this well negotiate a division of labour: the institutional review covers the institution's capacity, and the professional body covers the requirements of practice.

The third trigger is political. An institutional review produces a small number of reports about institutions, and a minister who is asked in parliament about a specific programme has nothing to show. A programme-level decision answers the question that a system-level judge-

ment cannot, and the demand for an answer is a durable feature of the political environment rather than a passing one.

The pattern is therefore not a reversal of the trend but a layering: systems accumulate arrangements, each of which was introduced to solve a problem that the existing arrangement could not address, and the accumulation is the reason the typology in this article has four categories rather than two. A system that describes itself as having moved to institutional review usually has a professional accreditation, a targeted review for a problematic field and a national examination somewhere in its architecture, and the description is a statement about the dominant instrument rather than about the whole.

10. Conclusions

The movement from programme to institutional review is real, partial and reversible, and it is better understood as a redistribution of authority than as a technical convergence. The efficiency argument is genuine and it is not the reason the change was made.

Three conclusions follow. The choice should be made and defended as a decision about who decides on curricula. The information lost in the move should be replaced by a publication requirement. And the exceptions should be designed explicitly, because they will appear anyway, and an undesigned exception is a privilege rather than a policy.

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Biography:

Don F. Westerheijden works on quality assurance and on the evaluation of higher education policy, and has advised several national agencies on the design of review procedures.

Sanne Bakker is a researcher at the University of Twente working on institutional governance and on the effects of external review on institutional behaviour.