

FROM CONVERGENCE TO DIVERGENCE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY ASSURANCE APPROACHES IN THE NETHERLANDS AND FLANDERS

Master thesis
14 February 2019

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor, dr. Westerheijden, for his guidance and feedback. And for his continuous support to develop this thesis. Also, I would like to express my gratitude towards prof. dr. Wessel for thinking along during the final stages of this thesis.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their loving supporting throughout the process of writing this thesis. In particular, I want to thank my parents for their encouragement and optimism.

Joanne Bakhuis

Enschede, February 2019

SUMMARY

The starting point of this thesis was to examine the apparent divergence of the NVAO, as indicated by the establishment of two separate departments (Flemish and Dutch) within the organization in 2017, after the apparent convergence of the NVAO, as symbolized by the establishment of the unique, binational organization in 2005. The time period analyzed in this thesis is from 2010 until 2017. The formulated research question in line with the starting point and time period is: *“which factors explain the apparent divergence in recent years between the Dutch and Flemish quality assurance approaches after the convergence symbolized by the establishment of the NVAO?”* In order to answer this main research question, two sub questions have been formulated. The first sub question addressed in this thesis is: *“how have the quality assurance policies of the Netherlands and Flanders developed in the period 2010-2017?”* The second sub question addressed in this thesis is: *“what are possible diverging factors regarding to quality assurance approaches?”*.

The theoretical framework outlined the convergence-divergence debate and subsequently discussed the new public management theory and the concepts of institutional autonomy and quality procedures. Previous research suggested that new public management, institutional autonomy and quality procedures could possibly influence the development from convergence to divergence. The degree to which institutions implement new public management and quality procedures and retrieve institutional autonomy could be shaped by historical, political, cultural, or economic contexts that may vary per region.

This thesis is a qualitative case study and documentary analysis was carried out in order to answer the research question. In total, 77 documents were collected and analyzed. In order to answer the first sub question, a timeline of the developments in Dutch and Flemish quality assurance approaches was reconstructed. The timeline showed that cultural differences were already visible in 2010. Furthermore, the timeline showed that the quality assurance approaches had not been implemented parallel which could foster the apparent divergence of both quality assurance approaches. The timeline also revealed the quality shortcomings in Dutch higher education institutions in 2010 and 2011 and its implications for both quality assurance approaches. In order to answer the second sub question, the documents were coded via Atlas.ti. The code analysis showed that for the code group new public management

‘reduced (administrative) burden’, ‘customization’ and ‘cost-benefit’ were the most frequent codes. For the code group institutional autonomy, ‘autonomy Flemish institutions’, ‘autonomy Dutch institutions’, ‘trust’, ‘accountability’, ‘image quality higher education Netherlands’ and ‘quality culture’ were the most frequent codes. For the code group quality procedures, ‘regulation’ and ‘prepossession’ were the most frequent codes.

Based on the analysis, three main factors which explain the development from convergence to divergence of Dutch and Flemish quality assurance approaches were found. First of all, cultural differences were identified as a factor that eventually led to divergence. Secondly, accidental circumstances were found to be a factor which eventually led to divergence. Accidental circumstances concerned the quality shortcomings in Dutch universities of applied sciences in 2010 and 2011 which had an enormous impact on the higher education sector. Thirdly, the balance of regulation and trust was found to be a factor that led to divergence.

Overall, the accidental circumstances were unforeseen and led to different balances between regulation and trust. The cultural differences may have been underestimated which eventually led to divergence. Even though cultural differences may seem to be small from a large-scale perspective, these can be (too) large in daily practice and eventually lead towards divergence over time. As with the Flanders and the Netherlands, from a (larger) European perspective, the cultural differences may seem to be relatively small. However, when taking a closer look at the development of the NVAO over the years, one can conclude that these ‘relatively small’ cultural differences were too big to keep the organization functioning in the increasingly converging way it was initially intended

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 THESIS MOTIVES

1.1.1 THE RISE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

During the past few decades, quality assurance has become more and more important for higher education institutions in order to cope with their rapidly changing environment. In line with the Bologna process, which aimed “to increase international competition and to achieve greater comparability and compatibility of higher education systems, attention to quality, its assurance and improvement, was predictable” (Huisman & Westerheijden, 2010, p. 63). Scientific literature has showed an increased interest in quality assurance in higher education since the early 1980s (Tsinidou, Gerogiannis & Fitsilis, 2010) and the 1990s have been labelled as “the decade of quality” (Frazer, 1992, p. 9). Nowadays, quality assurance has evolved into “a central objective of governmental policies and an important steering mechanism in higher education systems worldwide” (Van Damme, 2002, p. 95). Quality assurance has risen towards a pervasive, influential, and worldwide phenomenon at the top of the higher education agenda (Skolnik, 2010; Dunkerly & Whon, 2017).

Several developments are believed to have contributed to the increasing interest for quality assurance in higher education by governments, higher education institutions and society. The most frequently mentioned developments are the massification and globalization of higher education. The massification of higher education demands quality assessment in order to ensure “that systems and structures can process the ever-increasing number of students” (Morley, 2003, p. 1). It is expected that massification of higher education and its subsequent quality assessment demands will be of increasing importance because of two main reasons. Firstly, there is an increased demand for continuing education and lifelong learning (Knight, 2015). Secondly, today’s growing knowledge society requires massification of higher education to obtain more human resource capacity (Knight, 2015), especially since the knowledge society is becoming more important in developed countries as well. Furthermore, globalization led to an expansion of higher education across national boundaries and emerging international competition among higher education institutions which “demands more rigorous and robust measures for quality assurance” (Morley, 2003, p. 2-3; Dill, 1995). Besides increased competition, globalization influences such as “increased cross-border

activity creates a need for mechanisms to recognize academic and professional qualifications gained through domestic or international delivery of education” (Knight, 2015, p. 2). Other factors which have contributed towards the increased interest for quality assurance in higher education include deregulation of higher education systems and (political) demands for tighter connections between universities and economic development (Dill, 1995). Furthermore, from a higher education institutions’ perspective, the provision of higher education has turned into a product (Tsinidou, Gerogiannis & Fitsilis, 2010). As a consequence, higher education institutions “have been driven by competition to examine the quality of their services, to redefine their product and to measure customer satisfaction” (Tsinidou, Gerogiannis & Fitsilis, 2010, p. 227) since their long-term survival depends on the quality of their services compared to their ‘competitors’. Overall, it has been concluded that “business ethos and practices are becoming acceptable in higher education” (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016, p. 312).

1.1.2 QUALITY ASSURANCE FROM AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

It is generally acknowledged that higher education is one of the primary policy responsibilities of European states¹ (Keeling, 2006). However, these national and regional higher education policies are increasingly influenced by international pressures, such as global economic, cultural and educational forces (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Keeling, 2006). As a consequence of the traditional nation-level responsibility for higher education on the one side and the increasing international pressures regarding higher education on the other side, higher education institutions could experience friction. Nowadays, higher education institutions “are still anchored in country-specific regulatory and coordinative regimes, which to a great extent reflect national historical and institutional developments” (Dobbins, Knill & Vögtle, 2011, p. 666). Simultaneously, these higher education institutions are increasingly influenced by exterior, foreign visions on higher education systems, including quality assurance systems. The European Union (EU) has strongly encouraged the development of quality procedures in higher education and now almost all European countries have followed suit (Morley, 2003). Scientific literature concerning to what extent national quality assurance

¹ In some cases higher education is the primary responsibility of nation-states (such as in the Netherlands), whereas in other cases higher education is the primary responsibility of regional states, such as Gewest in Belgium and Länder in Germany.

frameworks can be effectively transferred to other nation-states is relatively sparse (Billing, 2004). Billing & Thomas (2000a, 2000b), have analyzed a project which aimed to establish the feasibility of introducing the United Kingdom quality assurance system in Turkish universities. They found that cultural, structural, political, and technical issues affected the transfer of the UK quality assurance system to Turkish universities. It is thought that this has “wider implications for the international transferability of quality assurance and assessment systems between nations” (Billing, 2004, p. 130).

1.1.3 THE CASE OF NVAO

On September 3rd, 2003, the Flemish Community of Belgium and the Kingdom of the Netherlands signed a Treaty concerning “the accreditation of programmes within Flemish and Dutch higher education”² As a result of this Treaty, the unique, binational and independent Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) was established on 1 February 2005. In line with the Treaty, the NVAO’s main tasks are twofold. Firstly, “to assess and assure the quality of Dutch and Flemish higher education” (NVAO, 2018). Secondly, “promoting a culture of quality in higher education” (NVAO, 2018). The NVAO can be seen as unique of its kind since it is binational, whereas organisations responsible for quality assessment and assurance in higher education are usually national. In March 2017, the NVAO published its strategy for 2017-2020. One of the key principles underpinning this strategy is “unity in diversity” (NVAO, 2017a). Even though quality assurance in both the Netherlands and Flanders is based on the same internationally documented principles, differences in the way in which these principles are substantiated were observed over the past years (NVAO, 2017a). As a binational organisation, the NVAO is confronted with two different systems (culturally and politically) which shape the internationally documented principles in different ways (NVAO, 2017b). Therefore, during the past years quality assurance systems in the Netherlands and Flanders have been developed separately. Each of them with their own focus and approach (NVAO, 2017b). Both the Netherlands and Flanders have expressed the need to create space for their own approach (NVAO, 2017b). Thus, the NVAO will continue with one joint board, and a Flemish department as well as a Dutch department. Meanwhile the NVAO

² Treaty between the Flemish Community of Belgium and the Kingdom of the Netherlands concerning the accreditation of programs within Flemish and Dutch higher education, the Flemish Community of Belgium and the Netherlands, 3 September 2003.

stresses the importance and value of being a binational organisation expressed in an international board, using the same basic principles and cooperation (NVAO, 2017b).

1.2 THESIS OBJECTIVES AND RELEVANCE

The recent developments at the NVAO as announced in the Strategy 2017-2020 document, namely the separate development of the Dutch and Flemish quality assurance systems which led to a Dutch and Flemish department within the binational organization, raise several questions regarding the quality assurance approaches in the Netherlands and Flanders. This thesis aims to gain a deeper understanding of the apparent divergence in the (development of) quality assurance systems in the Netherlands and Flanders. Whether or not this apparent diverging development is problematic could be seen as subjective. However, the convergence-promoting Bologna process (Dobbins, Knill & Vögtle, 2011) inspired the initial convergent development of the Dutch and Flemish quality assurance systems and the establishment of the first binational quality assurance organization NVAO. By contrast, over time the initial convergent developments did not last and turned out to develop in a diverging way. Therefore it is interesting to further explore the factors which caused divergence instead of the initial and aimed convergence. The timespan chosen to analyze this development is between 2010 and 2017. This scope of time was chosen since 2017 was the year in which the NVAO announced its apparent divergence through the Strategy 2017-2020 document. The year 2010 was chosen as a starting point since this marked the 5-year anniversary of the NVAO and thus the 5-year anniversary of bi-national cooperation of the Netherlands and Flanders. In 2010, the NVAO reflected positively on the first five years of cooperation and states that the accreditation systems are “largely tied” to each other (NVAO, 2011). Thus, at this point in time there did not appear to be divergence between both accreditation system yet. In line with this, the following research question has been formulated:

Which factors explain the apparent divergence in recent years (2010-2017) between the Dutch and Flemish quality assurance approaches after the convergence symbolized by the establishment of the NVAO?

In order to answer the main research question, two sub questions have been formulated. First of all, to answer the main research question it is important to trace the developments of quality assurance policies in both the Netherlands and Flanders. In line with this, the following

research question has been formulated: *“How have the quality assurance policies of the Netherlands and Flanders developed in the period 2010-2017?”* By answering this sub question one will get an overview of the separate, diverging quality assurance policy developments of the Netherlands and Flanders over time that eventually led to the divergence as announced in the Strategy 2017-2020.

Furthermore, to answer the main research question, it is important to get an overview of possible factors that could lead to a diverging development of the Netherlands’ and Flanders’ quality assurance approaches. In line with this, the following sub question has been formulated: *“What are possible diverging factors regarding to quality assurance approaches?”* By creating an overview of general, possible factors that could lead to diverging policy approaches, the analysis regarding the Netherlands and Flanders can be carried out more focused.

1.3 SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Scientific literature concerning to what extent national quality assurance frameworks can be effectively transferred to other nation-states is relatively sparse (Billing, 2004). As quality assurance in higher education is usually organized on a national level (within national higher education frameworks/policies) (Keeling, 2006; Dobbins, Knill & Vögtle, 2011), the unique case of the NVAO (as a binational quality assurance organization) provides an opportunity for further analysing the alleged increased divergence of a specific part of national higher education frameworks (namely quality assurance) in two comparable countries and could thus contribute to the understanding of possible complications of extending quality assurance frameworks to multiple countries/regions. So, first of all this thesis could contribute to the understanding of the transferability of quality assurance frameworks in higher education specifically. Furthermore, the specific case studied in this thesis also concerns the academic transferability debate in general. Secondly, this thesis could contribute to the academic convergence-divergence debate, as this study concerns a convergence-to-divergence development. By further analyzing the convergence-to-divergence development regarding quality assurance approaches in the Netherlands and Flanders specifically, one could add knowledge to the convergence-to-divergence debate in general, by exploring to what extent it is possible to converge policies (e.g. higher education quality assurance policies) in similar countries/regions (e.g. the Netherlands and Flanders), which factors should be taken into

account when aiming for convergence in similar countries – or by contrast, which factors could be seen as reasons to limit convergence or to support divergence.

1.4 SOCIAL RELEVANCE

Globalization and massification of higher education have led to an increased interest in quality assurance. Quality assurance in higher education has become more important to students, scholars, higher education institutions, and politicians – each with their own motivations. Therefore, quality in higher education should be assessed and assured carefully. Further researching the alleged diversification of quality assurance approaches in two comparable regions (the Netherlands and Flanders) could contribute to the understanding of factors that influence the way in which relatively comparable regions assess and assure quality differently – and thereby also contribute to the understanding of the current and possible future construction of the NVAO with one board and the same basic principles and cooperation. An increased understanding of which factors influence decisions on quality assurance approaches could be an interesting starting point for further researching quality assurance in other sectors and regions. The importance of quality assurance has not just increased in the higher education sector over the past few decades but also in other sectors such as the health care sector. Furthermore, an increased insight in which factors contribute to decisions on (international) quality assurance could maybe be applied to other comparable regions as well. Even more general, this thesis concerns a convergence-to-divergence development as well. Thus, this thesis could also contribute to the convergence-to-divergence debate in general and across several regions, by examining potential factors that could lead to divergence instead of the aimed convergence between countries or regions.

1.5 THESIS OUTLINE

The outline of this thesis is as follows. Chapter 2 provides a theoretical framework. In the theoretical framework, the convergence-divergence debate will first be discussed. Subsequently, the new public management theory and the concepts of institutional autonomy and quality procedures will be discussed. Chapter 3 describes the methodology used in this research. Firstly, the research design will be explained. Furthermore, data collection and data analysis methods will be discussed as well as the reliability and validity of the chosen research methodology. Chapter 4 provides a timeline of the developments between 2010 and 2017 and thereby answers the first sub question. Chapter 5 consists of the code analysis and thereby

answers the second sub question. Chapter 6 provides the conclusion. In this chapter the central research question will be answered, and the findings of this research and its limitations will be this discussed.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 THE CONVERGENCE-DIVERGENCE DEBATE

In this section, the convergence-divergence debate will be discussed. As the convergence-divergence debate is at the core of this research, the development and background of this debate will first be described here.

Whether, and if so, to what extent and why countries and regions are developing similar policies over time is at the core of comparative public policy research (Knill, 2005). Two contradictory strands of research explain the development of policies to become more similar (convergence) or less similar (divergence) over time. Over the past few years, the so-called 'convergence versus divergence debate' has received intensified and renewed interest (Holzinger, Knill & Arts, 2009). "This debate of convergence versus divergence of national policies is closely related to the booming research industry on globalization and Europeanization" (Knill, 2005, p. 765).

The first studies concerning the convergence versus divergence debate can be traced back to the early 1960s. Since the 1990s, this topic became an increasingly popular research interest among academics. "This development is closely related to an increasing research interest in the domestic impact of European integration and globalization" (Knill, 2005, p. 1). Since the 1990s, the impact of globalization became more and more visible and the European integration debate intensified. This fostered both the convergence and divergence strands of research. In line with these developments, scholars, politicians and society in general debated to what extent convergence and divergence of policies would be possible, or even desirable.

The universally accepted definition of convergence in general is "the tendency of societies to grow more alike, to develop similarities in structures, processes and performances" (Kerr, 1983, p. 3). In line with this general definition of convergence, the more specific concept of policy convergence has been described as "the tendency of policies to grow more alike, in the form of increasing similarity in structures, processes and performances" (Drezner, 2001, p. 54). Convergence theories "postulate that growing international integration will have implications for domestic policy – once indirectly through a change in domestic distribution of political power, and once directly through influence on governmental policy – and will lead to convergence of policies and institutions" (Busch, 2004, p. 70). An important characteristic of

convergence is that it entails a motion. “Convergence means moving from different positions towards some common point” (Bennett, 1991, p. 219). So, convergence doesn’t entail that countries, regions, policies and so on are common at one single point in time. However, the concept ‘convergence’ is often being confused with similarity (at one point in time). Instead, there must be a movement over time of countries, regions, policies and so on to some identified common point or towards more similarity (Bennett, 1991). One could view convergence as a process, which highlights the dynamic (instead of static) component (Bennett, 1991).

By contrast, the opposite strand of research, divergence, predicts different consequences. “The approaches focus on the stability of specific national characteristics such as the differences in national policy styles, the stability of institutional arrangements, and the importance of path dependence. Consequently, they predict constant or even increasing divergence in national policies and institutional structures” (Busch, 2004, p. 71). Divergence suggests that even though globalization and Europeanization might have some influence on national policies, “all globalization is local” (Douglass, 2005, p. 2). This entails that globalization leads to substantial changes in national policies, including higher education policies but “there is no uniform influence on nation-states or institutions” (Douglass, 2005, p. 1). Eventually, globalizing influences are subject to national and regional influences (Douglass, 2005). As with convergence, divergence should also be seen as a motion, a development over time.

The convergence versus divergence debate can also be seen as linked to harmonization in the EU. “Harmonization refers to a specific outcome of international cooperation, namely to constellations in which national governments are legally required to adapt similar policies and programs as part of their obligations as members of international institutions” (Holzinger & Knill, 2005, pp. 7-8). Harmonization ideas were strong in the 1990s, during the intensified European integration debate. “The mechanism of international harmonization leads to cross-national convergence if the involved countries comply with uniform legal obligations defined in international or supranational law” (Holzinger & Knill, 2005, p. 7). This entails that the countries involved lose some of their sovereignty. Despite the strong harmonization ideas, education was kept out of EU-competence and remained in state control for most European states (Keeling, 2006; van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994). The Bologna Process could be seen as an alternative way to organize harmonization ideas in the EU. Over time, the term

'harmonization' fell out of diplomatic favor but to this day, the convergence versus divergence debate remains of scientific interest.

Thus, the convergence-divergence debate has received renewed interest as a result of the booming research areas of globalization and Europeanization and its domestic impacts. Whereas one strand of research predicts that policies will grow more alike over time as a result of external, international pressures, the other strand of research predicts that policies will remain constant or even diverge over time because of different national policy styles, stable institutional arrangements and path dependency. This research will study an apparent convergence-to-divergence development. Namely, from the apparent convergence of Dutch and Flemish quality assurance approaches, as symbolized by the establishment of the NVAO, towards the apparent divergence of Dutch and Flemish quality assurance approaches, as symbolized by the 2017 NVAO Strategy announcement to establish a Dutch and Flemish department to create space for the separately developed quality assurance approaches (NVAO, 2017b). The apparent development from convergence to divergence is the dependent variable in this research. The factors which explain this apparent development are the independent variables in this research. Possible independent variables which, based on previous research, could lead towards this development from convergence to divergence will be discussed in sections 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4.

2.2 NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

2.2.1 WHY NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT?

In this section, the theory of new public management will be discussed. As new public management features have an important influence on the organization, structure and development of public organizations it is thought that new public management could be influential regarding to higher education institutions as well. Moreover, it has been concluded that "business ethos and practices are becoming acceptable in higher education" (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016, p. 312) which could be displayed by for example the view that higher education has turned into a 'product' (Tsinidou, Gerogiannis & Fitsilis, 2010). However, the degree of new public management features (including its subsequent business ethos and practices) might differ per higher education institution, per region or per country. As mentioned before, higher education institutions "are still anchored in country-specific

regulatory and coordinative regimes” (Dobbins, Knill & Vögtle, 2011, p. 666). These country-specific regulatory and coordinative regimes could differ regarding to the space, freedom or necessity for higher education institutions to implement new public management practices. This could possibly lead to divergence as the degree of new public management features subsequently differs across the involved regions or countries. Even though the accreditation system might simply be carried out in the same way for organizations, regions or countries highly influenced by new public management features and organizations, regions or countries not that much influenced by new public management features, the organizational culture, structure and vision will be very different which leads to different views on quality in general and quality assurance and accreditation more specifically. Furthermore, as mentioned before, especially globalization led to an expansion of higher education across national boundaries and an emerging international competition among higher education institutions which “demands more rigorous and robust measures for quality assurance” (Morley, 2003, p. 2-3;). As the degree of globalization and internationalization influences might differ per higher education institution, region and country as well, the “demands for more rigorous and robust measures for quality assurance” (Morley, 2003, p. 2-3) might differ per higher education institution, region and country as well. Moreover, without the emergence and rise of new public management, there would not be such an increased attention for (international) quality assurance approaches in higher education.

2.2.2 DEVELOPMENT OF NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

Starting in the 1980s, New Public Management practices appeared across several developed countries (Hood, 1995). New Public Management was initiated in the United Kingdom but soon spread to the United States, Australia and New Zealand, and later on to Scandinavia and Continental Europe as well (Lane, 2000). Since its inception, New Public Management has received attention from a wide range of scholars, including economists, political scientists and organizational theorists (Lane, 2000). Even though scholars have generally accepted that New Public Management exists, the exact meaning of New Public Management remains a matter of controversy (Barzelay, 2001). Perhaps as a result of being a multidisciplinary concept by nature, New Public Management remains “ill-defined” (Hood, 1991, p. 4) and “a loose term” (Hood, 1991, p. 3; Ferlie, Musselin & Andresani, 2008). Although there is no consensus about the exact definition of New Public Management, several common characteristics have been

named. Pollitt (1995) listed eight elements which are collectively known as New Public Management.

2.2.3 TYPICAL ELEMENTS OF NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

Firstly, a typical element of New Public Management is the focus on “cost cutting, capping budgets and seeking greater transparency in resource allocation” (Pollitt, 1995, p. 134). This typical element of New Public Management has been referred to by various scholars. For example, Gruening (2001) identified budget cuts as an undisputed characteristic of New Public Management which has been noted by most observers. Furthermore, it is stated that a typical doctrine of New Public Management is the “stress on greater discipline and parsimony in resource use” (Hood, 1991, p. 5) which implies cutting direct costs.

Secondly, New Public Management typically involves the separation of traditional bureaucratic organizations (such as many public organizations) into several agencies which are typically linked to the parent organization by a (quasi-)contract (Pollitt, 1995). Again, the shift to disaggregation of bureaucratic organizations into several agencies is a typical characteristic of New Public Management which has been noticed by many, including Hood (1991). The underlying idea of this element is that disaggregating bureaucratic organizations in several units makes them more ‘manageable’ and could thus lead to more efficiency (Hood, 1991).

Thirdly, decentralization is an important element in New Public Management. This entails that management authority in public organizations is decentralized which leads to ‘flatter’ hierarchies (Pollitt, 1995). Decentralization was labeled as one of the undisputed characteristics of New Public Management by Gruening (2001). The central idea behind decentralization in New Public Management is that it leads to less layered forms of organizations which are more flexible (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992).

Fourthly, New Public Management typically implies that the function of providing public services and the act of purchasing them are separated (Pollitt, 1995). Brignall and Modell (2000) have also noticed the implementation of this typical private sector management technique in new public management which implies that “purchasers and providers of public services have been split and are frequently required to contract with each other” (p. 281).

Fifthly, Pollitt (1995) mentions the implementation of market and quasi market-type mechanisms. This is a very general aspect of New Public Management which has been referred to by practically every observer of New Public Management. The implementation of (quasi)market mechanisms in the public sector could lead to a wide variety of changes. For example, increased competition, improved accounting and changes in management styles (Gruening, 2001). The central idea behind the implementation of (quasi)market mechanisms in the public sector is to make public sector organizations more efficient by using 'proven' private sector tools in the public sector (Hood, 1991).

Sixthly, New Public Management practices often entail the implementation of performance management (Pollitt, 1995). More specifically, this implies that staff of public organizations are required to work with "performance targets, indicators and output objectives" (Pollitt, 1995, p. 134). The implementation of more explicit performance measures is seen as a typical component of New Public Management by others as well (e.g. Gruening, 2001; Hood, 1991). Setting more explicit performance measures could lead to improved accountability and efficiency in public sector organizations as "accountability requires clear statement of goals" and "efficiency requires 'hard look at objectives'" (Gruening, 2001, p. 15).

Seventhly, Pollitt (1995) notices a change in collective labor agreements in the public sector. New Public Management practices typically include "shifting the basis of public employment from permanency and standard national pay and conditions towards term contracts, performance-related pay and local determination of pay and conditions" (Pollitt, 1995, p. 134). The implementation of different policies regarding to the payment and conditions of public organizations employees is originating from the private sector as well. Hood (1991) already noted that moving to term contracts instead of permanent contracts in the public sector leads to a shift of competition in public sector organizations. The central idea behind the implementation of these private sector ideas is that rivalry is seen as "the key to lower costs and better standards" (Hood, 1991, p. 5). Or, more specifically, "the need to improve performance while reducing the burden of the large public sector wage bill and making employment more competitive" (Larbi, 1999, p. 16)

Finally, it is stated that "increasing emphasis on service 'quality', standard setting and 'customer responsiveness'" (Pollitt, 1995, p. 134) is a typical element of New Public

Management. The focus on customer orientation and quality is a commonly mentioned component of New Public Management. Specifically, this implies that public services are made more responsive to the wishes of their users (citizens) (Larbi, 1999). The typical reasoning behind the implementation of such measures is that it increases “customer ‘voice’ and accountability in service provision” (Larbi, 1999, p. 16).

2.2.4 MARKETIZATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

As a result of the reinventing government (Osborn & Gaebler, 1992) and new public management (Hood, 1991) movements, the public sector in developed countries has adopted multiple methods and values originating from the private sector to guide policy creation and management (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004). The overarching terms of these developments, marketization, encompasses both market ideologies and market-oriented reforms (Djelic, 2006). A market ideology refers to the idea that markets have a superior efficiency when it comes to the allocation of goods and resources (Djelic, 2006). Market-oriented reforms are “those policies fostering the emergence and development of markets and weakening, in parallel, alternative institutional arrangements” (Djelic, 2006, p. 1). Marketization has heavily influenced public sector organizations in developed countries over the past decades. Market-oriented reforms have been adopted across various sectors, such as health care and education (Djelic, 2006). Marketization in higher education is more specifically focused on the implementation of various new public management features in the higher education sector.

A much noted development by scholars in the higher education field is the movement of colleges and universities to show more adaptive, entrepreneurial, and market-oriented behavior (Sporn, 1999; Clark, 1998). In other words, marketization is an often identified development in the higher education field. At the institutional level, “marketization means privatization, in that it is pushing universities to adopt more private industry mechanisms, such as financial controls and accounting, or a profit-center philosophy within the institution” (Sporn, 2003, p. 35). In practice, universities and colleges have been urged to adopt commercial models of knowledge, finance, accounting and management organization since the 1980s (Teixeira & Dill, 2011; Levidow, 2002). Arguments for universities and colleges to do so are twofold. On the one side, they want to protect themselves from the increased threats. On the other side, they want to maintain state funding which is more and more dependent of the efficiency of their organization (Levidow, 2002). At the system level, higher education has

become a more diversified market with increased student and staff mobility (Sporn, 2003). Consequently, there is increased competition among higher education institutions. As a result of marketization (privatization), finances in higher education change as well. They are becoming more diverse, less dependent on state subsidies and more dependent on e.g. tuition fees, which may relate to a university's perceived quality. The state's pushing towards efficiency as well as the growing importance of perceptions of quality may have consequences for quality assurance in higher education, as will be shown in section 2.4.

Finally, the importance of marketization in higher education has also been addressed by the European University Association. It has been stated that "it would be important to track the visible and less visible forms of marketization" (EUA, 2015, p. 16) over time. Moreover, "it would be worth monitoring where and how this is happening, and particularly if there is a difference in the way different sub-regions of Europe address these issues and with what impact and consequences (EUA, 2015, p. 16).

2.2.5 INTERNATIONAL DIFFERENCES REGARDING TO NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT AND MARKETIZATION PRACTICES

A very important remark regarding to both New Public Management and marketization practices is that the implementation as well as the perspective on both developments differs enormously among countries and regions, as already suggested in the previous section by the EUA. This remark has often been stressed by scholars studying both developments. Regarding to typical elements of New Public Management practices, Pollitt (1995) emphasized that these elements altogether should be viewed as a 'shopping basket'. The metaphor 'shopping basket' is used in order to stress that *altogether* these elements "have come to known *collectively* as the New Public Management" (Pollitt, 1995, p. 133). The previously mentioned elements are commonly practiced in a wide range of developed countries. However, not each element is present in every case (Pollitt, 1995). The exact presence of New Public Management elements differs from country to country. Thus, while one element might be widely practiced in a certain country, this is not necessarily the case in other countries. The characteristics in the 'shopping basket' of New Public Management differ and there are multiple characteristic mixtures possible which could all be referred to as New Public Management (Pollitt, 1995). The fact that the 'shopping basket' of New Public Management differs so widely across countries is only to be expected, since "different countries have experienced different historical trajectories and

seek to reform themselves within very different constitutional frameworks” (Pollitt, 1995, pp. 133-134). These different historical trajectories could also influence the institutional autonomy of for example higher education institutions within a state, as will be further explained in section 2.3. Regarding to Europe, “continental European governments have adapted and re-interpreted many of the Anglo-American ideas underpinning the New Public Management, to adjust them to their own national politico-administrative contexts” (Pollitt, van Thiel, Homburg, 2007, p. 1). In a European Union context, the space for the interpretation and adoption of new public management features could however also be restrained as a result of harmonization efforts. Overall, New Public Management reform practices “may have the same labels in different countries but not need to be the same in practice or in meaning: there is both convergence and divergence” (Pollitt, van Thiel, Homburg, 2007, p. 1).

Today’s global knowledge-based economy is “accelerating the shift to high-skilled, high-waged European economies” (Brown, Lauder & Ashton, 2008, p. 131). As a result, higher education has expanded over the years and has obtained a more prominent role in national and European economic policy (Brown, Lauder & Ashton, 2008). States realize that higher education is becoming increasingly important for their overall welfare and development. “In order to make individual nation-states more competitive, schools and universities in different parts of the globe have been under tremendous pressures from government and the general public to restructure/reinvent themselves in order to adapt to the ever-changing socio-economic and socio-political environments” (Mok, 2003, p. 352). The socio-economic and socio-political environment in a country are nowadays influenced by global pressures as well. However, the nature of the socio-economic and socio-political environment differs across countries. As nation-states need to run their business “with limited resources in the present social and economic context, coupled with the intensified pressures to improve their competitiveness, different governance strategies such as decentralization [...] and marketization are adopted” (Mok, 2003, p. 352). As one can imagine, the governance strategies adopted differ per country. Furthermore, the drivers for marketization differ per country as well (Sporn, 2003).

2.2.6 CONCLUDING REMARKS REGARDING NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT THEORY

The emergence and rise of new public management has had an influence on the increased attention for quality assurance in higher education. As the degree of new public management

features might differ across higher education institutions, regions and countries, the organizational culture, structure and vision and subsequently its view on quality in general and quality assurance and accreditation more specifically will be very different. Even though there is discussion about the exact meaning of new public management, Pollitt (1995) listed eight typical elements of new public management features. New public management features differ widely, and could be seen as different combinations of Pollitt's eight elements in a metaphorical shopping basket. The different combinations of Pollitt's eight elements also lead to different kinds of new public management features and different degrees to what extent new public management features are being implemented across higher education institutions, regions or countries. From a convergence-divergence perspective, new public management could either contribute to convergence as the space for the interpretation and adoption of new public management features could be restrained as a result of European harmonization efforts. By contrast, new public management features could also lead towards convergence as new public management consists of several elements, which are combined in different ways across institutions, regions or countries. The implementation of new public management practices could also be dependent on the "country-specific regulatory and coordinative regimes, which to a great extent reflect national historical and institutional developments" (Dobbins, Knill & Vögtle, 2011, p. 666). Even when new public management reform practices "may have the same labels in different countries but not need to be the same in practice or in meaning: there is both convergence and divergence" (Pollitt, van Thiel, Homburg, 2007, p. 1)

2.3 INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

2.3.1 WHY INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY?

In this section the concept 'institutional autonomy' will be further discussed. Institutional autonomy is of interest in relation to the research question and research aim as the degree of institutional autonomy in the Dutch and Flemish higher education sector might differ. When higher education institutions in one country or region have obtained a higher degree of institutional autonomy then this leads to different dynamics in the higher education sector of this country or region. Typically, several actors are active in the higher education sector of a country or region, such as the government, the Ministry of Education, higher education institutions (universities and universities of applied sciences), higher education accreditation organizations, the education inspectorate and so on. It is expected that the dynamics and

hierarchy within each higher education sector differs. If in one country or region the higher education institutions have obtained a relatively high degree of institutional autonomy (because this was historically the case, for example), then they have more influence in the higher education sector as a whole (agenda setting and so on) but also regarding the quality assurance approaches in higher education specifically. In case there would be differences between the Netherlands and Flanders regarding institutional autonomy – and thus regarding the dynamics and hierarchy in the higher education sectors – then this could lead to divergence. Therefore, one could expect that higher education institutions with a relatively high degree of institutional autonomy (e.g. retrieved historically) are less willing to obey to external (especially ‘foreign’) quality assurance approaches than higher education institutions with a relatively low degree of institutional autonomy.

2.3.2 THE DEVELOPMENT OF INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY

Institutional autonomy among European higher education institutions has increased as a consequence of the changing relationship between states and universities. Institutional autonomy in the higher education field usually entails that “the state has moved to a supervising role by delegating much of the decision-making power to the institution’s leadership and governance” (Sporn, 2003, p. 34). More specifically, the delegation of decision-making power in universities has empowered the top of the institution, since influence has been redistributed from the individual chair professor towards the top of the institution (Sporn, 2003). Furthermore, boards have been established in order to represent the general public’s interest (Sporn, 2003). This shift is often based on new public management ideas.

Over the past decade, the changing relationship between states and higher education institutions have led to intense debates (Bennetot Pruvot & Estermann, 2017). These debates considering university governance and autonomy were conducted in different contexts across various European countries as a response to the various challenges these countries were facing (Bennetot Pruvot & Estermann, 2017). As a logical consequence “the degree of institutional autonomy for individual higher education institutions across Europe differs widely” (CHEPS, 2008, p. 27). The European University Association (EUA) has developed an Autonomy Scorecard with the aim to compare institutional autonomy in the higher education field across European countries (Bennetot Pruvot & Estermann, 2017). The EUA’s Autonomy Scorecard is based on the EUA’s Lisbon Declaration in 2007.

According to this declaration there are four basic dimensions regarding to autonomy, namely organizational autonomy, financial autonomy, staffing autonomy and academic autonomy (Bennetot Pruvot & Estermann, 2017). Organizational autonomy refers to the composition and structure of governance of higher education institutions, its internal structures, its leadership model(s), and its ability to create legal entities (Bennetot Pruvot & Estermann, 2017). Financial autonomy refers to, amongst others, the higher education institution's allocation of public funding and students' financial contributions (Bennetot Pruvot & Estermann, 2017). Staffing autonomy refers to, amongst others, the higher education institutions' recruitment procedures and approval of staff (Bennetot Pruvot & Estermann, 2017). Academic autonomy refers to the overall student numbers of a higher education institution, its admission mechanisms, its ability to introduce and terminate degree programs, its capacity to choose the language of instruction, its capacity to design the content of studies and its capacity to select quality assurance mechanisms and providers (Bennetot Pruvot & Estermann, 2017). The autonomy of higher education institutions could thus differ when it comes to the dimensions of organizational, financial, staffing, and academic autonomy.

2.3.3 INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY ACROSS COUNTRIES AND REGIONS

As mentioned in section 1.1, the higher education sector is currently experiencing rapid changes and developments, including globalization and massification. Today's technology driven and knowledge-based society demands an increased need for qualified workforce (Gül, Gül, Kaya & Alican, 2010). In contemporary knowledge-based societies, knowledge itself is seen as an industry, and as a main input for productivity and production (Gül et al., 2010). Thus, economic growth in contemporary knowledge-based societies is largely dependent on qualified workforce. "In such a world, the role of higher education institutions in society and economy is increased" (Gül et al., 2010, p. 1878).

This increased role, as a result of the rapid changes and developments mentioned before, poses new challenges for higher education institutions. "One of the main challenges is to meet increasing expectations for quality and diversity in an era of financial austerity" (Gül et al., 2010, p. 1879). Because despite the increased role of higher education institutions in society and economy "today's university environment in Europe is characterized by the diminished role of the state as the funding agent of intellectual development" (Felt & Glanz, 2004, p. 17). The involvement of the state regarding higher education (Sporn, 2003) as well as the "public

funds available to higher education institutions have decreased” (Gül et al., 2010, p. 1880). The diminished role of the state as well as the decreased public funds available to higher education fosters “the need for developing innovative methods to continue providing quality higher education services” (Gül et al., 2010, p. 1880). However, in order to be innovative, universities require “more space to maneuver, and, thus, more institutional autonomy” (Gül et al., 2010, p. 1880).

Overall, a tendency towards institutional autonomy in higher education has been perceived (Gül et al., 2010). The aforementioned diminished role of the state, decreased public funding and subsequent need for innovative methods seem to have contributed to this tendency. This is also illustrated in the EUA-Trends 2010 Report, which states that 43% of the questioned European universities named ‘more autonomy’ as one of the most important developments at the time.

Even though there might be a tendency towards institutional autonomy in higher education, the degree of institutional autonomy may vary across nations and regions, as “institutional autonomy is a relative concept, conditional on a variety of historical, cultural, political, and economic factors” (Meek, 2010, p. 341). So the institutional autonomy of higher education institutions could be shaped by its historical, cultural, political and economic environment. As states and regions often share similar historical, cultural and political backgrounds – which all influence institutional autonomy – one could assume that it is possible that institutional autonomy varies across states and/or regions. Furthermore, changing social and political contexts “set the limit on the degree to which higher education institutions can behave as independent actors” (Meek, 2010, p. 342). Even though there is said to be a tendency towards institutional autonomy in higher education (Meek, 2010), “there have been a number of reports indicating that many in the academic community believe that higher education institutions have lost autonomy and the freedom to determine their own directions” (Meek, 2010, p. 344). Consequently, “in several jurisdictions, this has created a strong them/us attitude between universities and government and severely eroded academic morale” (Meek, 2010, p. 344). Furthermore, the degree of institutional autonomy for universities has always been moderated by its political context (Meek, 2010).

2.3.4 CONCLUDING REMARKS REGARDING CONCEPT OF INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY

Institutional autonomy of higher education institutions has an influence on the dynamics and hierarchy within a higher education sector. When the dynamics and hierarchy of higher education sectors differ a lot then this could lead to divergence. It is thought that higher education institutions with a relatively high degree of institutional autonomy are less willing to accept or obey to external quality assurance approaches since they obtained historically a higher degree of independency. Institutional autonomy can be divided into four categories, namely: organizational autonomy, staffing autonomy, financial autonomy, and academic autonomy.

Institutional autonomy could be viewed from a convergence-divergence perspective in various ways. One of the main developments in the higher education sector during the past years has been the diminishing role of the state and decreased public funds. At the same time, higher education institutions have obtained a more and more important role in the knowledge-based society. In order to fulfil the increased demand by society while at the same time being confronted with a diminished role of the state, as well as decreased funding, higher education institutions need to develop innovative methods. However, in order to be innovative, universities require “more space to maneuver, and, thus, more institutional autonomy” (Gül et al., 2010, p. 1880). Even though the diminishing role of the state and decreased public funds might be a general trend, the role of the state as well as the amount of public funds available for higher education may still differ between countries and regions. Subsequently, the need to be innovative and thus require more institutional autonomy, may differ across countries and regions as well, leading towards potential divergence. Furthermore, the degree of innovativeness in higher education might be influenced by the higher education sectors’ historical, political and cultural context. Therefore, this could also lead towards divergence.

Furthermore, despite the general tendency towards a diminished role of the state in higher education, there is a strong belief in some academic communities that their higher education institutions have lost autonomy. Subsequently, “in several jurisdictions, this has created a strong them/us attitude between universities and government and severely eroded academic morale” (Meek, 2010, p. 344). Thus, the view of the academic community regarding institutional autonomy might differ across jurisdictions.

Overall, this changing relationship between the state and higher education institutions has led to intense debate regarding institutional autonomy. These debates were conducted in different contexts across various European countries as a response to the various challenges these countries were facing (Bennetot Pruvot & Estermann, 2017). Suggesting that the different contexts in which institutional autonomy debates took place in European countries and regions might lead to divergence when it comes to institutional autonomy. Even though there might be a general tendency towards institutional autonomy in higher education, the degree of institutional autonomy may vary across nations and regions, as “institutional autonomy is a relative concept, conditional on a variety of historical, cultural, political, and economic factors” (Meek, 2010, p. 341).

2.4 QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

2.4.1 WHY QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

In this section, the concept quality in higher education will be further discussed. This research assessed the development of quality assurance approaches and therefore it is important to get an overview of the development of quality and quality procedures in academic literature over time. Moreover, both ‘quality’ and ‘quality assurance’ are central concepts in this thesis and will therefore be further discussed. If quality and subsequently quality assurance and accreditation are perceived differently across higher education institutions, regions or countries, then this would inevitably lead to divergence regarding the development of quality assurance approaches between these higher education institutions, regions or countries. Moreover, even if quality is perceived in more or less the same way by different actors, when these actors value the quality and subsequently the quality assurance and accreditation differently, then this will also inevitably lead to divergence in their quality assurance approaches.

2.4.2 DEVELOPMENT OF QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION OVER TIME

In the 1990s, labeled as the “decade of quality” (Frazer, 1992, p. 9), external evaluation systems for higher education have been implemented in nearly all European countries (Thune, 2017). The Bologna Declaration in 1999, resulting in the Bologna process, is an important milestone for (international) quality assurance in Europe. Several developments underlined the “need for change and convergence of systems of European quality assurance” (Thune,

2017, p. 94). The most important developments leading towards the need for convergence were internationalization (Thune, 2017) and marketization/increased competitive pressures (Dobbins, Knill & Vögtle, 2011). “The international changes affecting higher education are a growing international market for higher education, transactional education and a need for recognition of degrees due to graduate mobility” (Thune, 2017, p. 94). As a result of marketization and increased competitive pressures, the provision of higher education has turned into a product (Tsinidou, Gerogiannis & Fitsilis, 2010). As a consequence, higher education institutions “have been driven by competition to examine the quality of their services, to redefine their product and to measure customer satisfaction” (Tsinidou, Gerogiannis & Fitsilis, 2010, p. 227) since their long-term survival depends on the quality of their services compared to their ‘competitors’. Overall, some even argue that the Bologna declaration could be seen as “a European response” (Thune, 2017, p. 94) to internationalization, and maybe even globalization, developments. It is clear that the Bologna Declaration skyrocketed the international higher education community’s attention for quality. The overall objectives of the Bologna process are to “increase international competitiveness and to achieve greater comparability and compatibility of higher education systems” (Huisman & Westerheijden, 2010, p. 63). As a result of this objective, “in Europe and beyond, the Bologna process has also played a key role in stoking national reforms of higher education and there are strong reasons to believe that Bologna is likely to foster changes in national governance structures” (Dobbins, Knill & Vögtle, 2011, p. 666). Thus, the Bologna process strongly supports convergence in European higher education – quality assurance and accreditation included. It could be seen as a convergence-promoting process (Dobbins, Knill & Vögtle, 2011).

2.4.3 DEFINING QUALITY AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

As quality and quality assurance are central in this thesis, both concepts will be further discussed in this section. First of all, the more general concept ‘quality’ will be discussed. Quality could be seen as a relative concept (Harvey & Green, 1993). There are two ways in which one could see quality as relative. First, the way in which quality is perceived depends on both the user of the concept and the circumstances (Harvey & Green, 1993). There are numerous ‘stakeholders’ when it comes to higher education, such as students, academic staff, governments and its funding agencies and so on. Each stakeholder will have a different

perspective on quality in higher education or a higher education institution. “This is not a different perspective on the same thing but different perspectives on different things with the same label” (Harvey & Green, 1993, p. 10). Second, there is a ‘benchmark’ relativism of quality (Harvey & Green, 1993). This entails that some view quality in terms of absolutes whereas others view quality “in terms of absolute thresholds that have to be exceeded to obtain a quality rating” (Harvey & Green, 1993, p. 10).

Even though quality is a relative concept and there are a thus widely differing definitions of quality in use, Harvey & Green (1993) grouped five “discrete but interrelated ways of thinking about quality” (Harvey & Green, 1993, p. 11). The five ways of thinking about quality are: the exceptional view of quality, quality as perfection, quality as fitness for purpose, quality as value for money, and quality as transformation (Harvey & Green, 1993). Different dimensions of quality have later also been acknowledged by others, stating that “quality itself has different dimensions, including the appropriateness of goals (or ‘fitness of purpose’), the features of the educational provision provided (curriculum, teaching methods, support services), the effects of the provision upon students (learning outcomes), and the extent of students’ satisfaction with the experiences and outcomes (the ‘consumer’ emphasis)” (Brennan, Cremonini, King, Lewis, Wells & Westerheijden, 2017, p. 5).

Overall, one could argue that quality is a philosophical concept (Harvey & Green, 1993). As mentioned before, definitions of quality vary widely. Thereby, the different definitions of quality also reflect the different perspectives of individual stakeholders and society. “In a democratic society there must be room for people to hold different views: there is no single direct definition of quality” (Harvey & Green, 1993, p. 28). In order to cope with the complex philosophical question of ‘what is quality’, a practical solution might be to look at the different criteria that stakeholders or interest groups use in judging quality (Harvey & Green, 1993). “Not because it is atheoretical, but because it recognizes and acknowledges the rights of different interest groups to have different perspectives” (Harvey & Green, 1993, p. 29).

Now that the concept ‘quality’ has been discussed, the concept ‘quality assurance’ will be considered. Harvey identified four purposes of quality assurance, namely: “accountability, control, compliance and improvement” (2007, p. 1). First of all, accountability is defined as “institutions taking responsibility for the services they provide and the public money they

spend” (Harvey, 2007, p. 1). The reference ‘for the services they provide’ entails “that an appropriate educational experience is both promised and delivered” (Brennan et al., 2017, p. 5). Second, control has been defined as “ensuring the integrity of the higher education sector, in particular making it difficult for poor or rogue providers to continue operating and making access to the sector dependent on the fulfilment of criteria of adequacy” (Harvey, 2007, p. 1). Third, compliance refers to “ensuring that institutions adopt procedures, practices and policies that are considered by funders, governments and professional bodies to be desirable for the proper conduct of the sector and to ensure its quality” (Harvey, 2007, p. 2). Finally, improvement “is less about constraint and more about encouragement of adjustment and change” (Harvey, 2007, p. 2). In practice, quality assurance systems could combine several or maybe all of the four dimensions as identified by Harvey. “The different dimensions tend to be emphasized at different times in different contexts by different stakeholders” (Brennan et al., 2017, p. 5). In line with quality in general, quality assurance is dependent on the different perspectives of individual stakeholders and society. Moreover, quality assurance could also differ with regard to focus. On the one hand, quality assurance could “focus directly on academic quality and standards” (Brennan et al., 2017, p. 5), on the other hand, quality assurance could “focus more on organizational and managerial procedures that are in place to ensure quality and standards” (Brennan et al., 2017, p. 5)

2.4.4 INTERNAL VERSUS EXTERNAL QUALITY

One of the strongest reform issues in European higher education is the increased concern for quality. The quality movement has an internal as well as an external perspective (Van Vught, 1995). Internal quality issues consist of an increased need to assess performance. One of the most prominent examples is the standard evaluation of teaching in higher education. However, the use of the results of these standard evaluations are still mixed among European countries. Regarding to research, “publication records, grant proposals, or involvement in professional activities have only recently received attention, as historically most promotion decisions have been based on monographs” (Sporn, 2003, p. 35). The quality of administration, on the other hand, is still ignored or largely neglected, as few approaches exist to evaluate the performance of administration in many European countries (Rhoades and Sporn, 2002). The quality of administration should not be underestimated since it could eventually also influence the performance assessment of organizations, therefore it is relevant

in assessing internal quality. External quality issues consist of increasing accountability measures and accreditation procedures. Since European states have generally withdrawn from their traditional role, their past authority had to be replaced. Consequently, higher education institutions are held more accountable than before. Furthermore, with the establishment of performance-based budgeting, higher education institutions have to deliver services as defined by contract and need to be more efficient (Harvey, 1997).

2.4.5 AMBIGUOUS RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN QUALITY AND NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT/MARKETIZATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

As mentioned before, the implementation of new public management features is becoming more and more common in the higher education sector (also described as marketization of higher education). As a result of marketization and increased competitive pressures, the provision of higher education has turned into a product (Tsinidou, Gerogiannis & Fitsilis, 2010). As a consequence, higher education institutions “have been driven by competition to examine the quality of their services, to redefine their product and to measure customer satisfaction” (Tsinidou, Gerogiannis & Fitsilis, 2010, p. 227) since their long-term survival depends on the quality of their services compared to their ‘competitors’. The relationship between this development and quality in higher education is ambiguous. On the one side, marketization in higher education, including “marketing and other managerial practices are associated with serious risks to the quality of education and research, as these areas may be neglected in the pursuit of recruitment” (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016, p. 314). On the other side, one could also say that higher educational institutions nowadays need to obtain a good quality assurance in order to attract students and employees, to compete with other higher educational institutions for their survival.

2.4.6 CONCLUDING REMARKS REGARDING QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Quality has become a very important concept in higher education since a few decades. The Bologna declaration in 1999 was a very important milestone regarding (international) quality assurance in Europe. Developments as internationalization and marketization in higher education have called for more convergent developments in European higher education, including quality assurance. The overall objectives of the Bologna process are to “increase international competitiveness and to achieve greater comparability and compatibility of

higher education systems” (Huisman & Westerheijden, 2010, p. 63). Thus, the Bologna declaration strongly supports convergence of European higher education.

Quality could be seen as a relative concept, dependent on the user of the concept, the circumstances and the benchmark used. Overall, one could view quality as a philosophical concept (Harvey & Green, 1993). Subsequently, the definitions of quality differ widely and reflect different perspectives of individual stakeholders and society. Thus, the philosophical concept of quality leaves a lot of space for different interpretations which could possibly reflect divergence. Quality assurance has been studied by Harvey who identified four purposes of quality assurance, namely: “accountability, control, compliance and improvement” (2007, p. 1). In practice, quality assurance systems could combine several or maybe all of the four dimensions as identified by Harvey. “The different dimensions tend to be emphasized at different times in different contexts by different stakeholders” (Brennan et al., 2017, p. 5). In line with quality in general, quality assurance is dependent on the different perspectives of individual stakeholders and society.

Finally, one could distinguish internal and external quality assurance. Internal quality issues consist of an increased need to assess performance. External quality issues consist of increasing accountability measures and accreditation procedures. Finally, one should take into account the ambiguous relationship between new public management features in higher education (marketization of higher education) and quality.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 RESEARCH STRATEGY

This thesis examines the causes for the apparent recent divergence between Dutch and Flemish quality assurance approaches as symbolized by the separate developments of both approaches noted in the Strategy 2017-2020, after the previous alleged convergence of these quality assurance approaches as symbolized by the establishment of the NVAO. The corresponding research question was formulated as “which factors explain the apparent divergence in recent years between Dutch and Flemish quality assurance approaches after the convergence symbolized by the establishment of the NVAO?” The aim of this thesis is to gain an understanding of *why* the quality assurance approaches of the Netherlands and Flanders appear to have diverged recently. This section will provide a more detailed description of the research strategy in this thesis.

3.1.1 UNIT OF ANALYSIS

The unit of analysis is “the what or whom being studied” (Babbie, 2013, p. 97) and is considered to be relevant to all kinds of social research. Social researchers tend to select individuals as their unit of analysis. However, groups, formal social organizations and social artifacts could also be the unit of analysis in social research (Babbie, 2013). As mentioned before, this thesis aims to gain a deeper understanding of the recent divergence of Dutch and Flemish quality assurance approaches, as symbolized by the separate developments of the approaches announced in the NVAO Strategy 2017-2020. In other words, this thesis aims to understand apparent divergence of the Dutch and Flemish *quality assurance policy*, after the initial convergence of the Dutch and Flemish quality assurance policy. In order to fulfil the aim of the thesis, the developments (divergence and convergence) of the Dutch and Flemish quality assurance policy will be studied. Therefore, the units of analysis of this thesis is (the Dutch and Flemish) quality assurance policy.

3.1.2 QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

As one could derive from the formulated research question and aim, this thesis is a qualitative case study. A case study has been described as “the intensive study of a single case” (Gerring, 2012, p. 411) and “the in-depth examination of a single instance or some social phenomenon” (Babbie, 2013, p. 338). In this thesis, the NVAO will be studied extensively in order to gain an

insight in the factors which led to the apparent divergence of the Dutch and Flemish quality assurance approaches after a prior alleged convergence of both quality assurance approaches. Thus, the case under study is in line with the units of analysis: the NVAO.

Another characteristic of this single case study is that it is qualitative. Qualitative could also be described as nonnumerical. A qualitative analysis entails “the nonnumerical examination and interpretation of observations, for the purpose of discovering underlying meanings and patterns of relationships” (Babbie, 2013, p. 390). Qualitative analysis is most typical in field research and historical research (Babbie, 2013). A qualitative approach was chosen since this research is by nature qualitative: the goal is to discover the underlying meanings of the separate developments of the Netherlands’ and Flanders’ quality assurance approaches. In other words: the goal of this research is to understand the recent policy divergence after prior policy convergence. Both policy divergence/convergence and aiming to find underlying meanings is by nature nonnumerical, thus qualitative. Furthermore, the best available data to be used in this thesis (documents) are qualitative. This will be further outlined in the next subchapter.

3.1.3 DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS

In order to fulfil the aforementioned aim of this research, a documentary analysis will be conducted. A documentary analysis can be described as “a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents” (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). The documents to be reviewed or evaluated have been recorded without the researcher’s intervention. Documents that are used in documentary analysis come in a wide variety of forms, including background papers, letters and memoranda, newspapers, organizational and institutional reports, survey data, and public records (Bowen, 2009). As mentioned before, this study is a qualitative case study aiming to gain an understanding regarding the factors that led to the apparent divergence of the Netherlands’ and Flanders’ quality assurance approaches. In order to fulfil this aim, the policy processes regarding the quality assurance of both the Netherlands and Flanders in the period 2010-2016/2017 need to be traced. By tracing the developments of the policy processes, the process towards divergence can be reconstructed. So-called process tracing has been defined as “the systematic examination of diagnostic pieces of evidence, typically viewed in a chronological sequence, with the objecting of evaluating hypotheses formulated by the investigator” (Collier, 2011, p. 1). A documentary analysis is thought to be the best method to

do so, since there is an enormous amount of documents regarding to the policy processes of quality assurance approaches in the Netherlands and Flanders available for the period 2010-2016/2017. By reviewing and evaluating these documents systematically (Bowen, 2009), and in a chronological sequence, the policy processes can be accurately reconstructed.

Institutional and organizational documents are a staple in qualitative research for many years now. In recent years, the documentary analysis method has become increasingly popular. One can witness a strong increase in the number of journal articles and research reports mentioning documentary analysis in their methodology section (Bowen, 2009). “As a research method, document analysis is particularly applicable to qualitative case studies – intensive studies producing rich descriptions of a single phenomenon, event, organization, or program” (Bowen, 2009, p. 29). The rationale for document analysis lies in, among others, “the immense value of documents in case study research” (Bowen, 2009, p. 29). By analyzing documents in a documentary analysis, one could track change and development. In case there are several drafts of a particular document available, the researcher can compare them in order to identify changes (Bowen, 2009). Even small changes could reflect substantive developments. Furthermore, the researcher could examine periodic and final reports “to get a clear picture of how an organization or program fared over time” (Bowen, 2009, p. 30).

In sum, the value of documents in qualitative research has been acknowledged for many years. The documentary analysis research method has recently become increasingly popular in research papers and journal articles. Documentary analysis is particularly applicable to qualitative case studies since it produces rich, in-depth descriptions of a single phenomenon or organization (Bowen, 2009). Furthermore, documentary analysis is an excellent means for tracking change and development (Bowen, 2009). A documentary analysis enables the researcher to trace the policy processes regarding quality assurance approaches and is therefore a good tool to reconstruct the divergence process. Since this thesis is a case study in which the recent developments of the NVAO will be examined, the documentary analysis method is thought to suit this study.

A possible critique regarding the application of a documentary analysis in this thesis could be the assumption that important policy changes and the motivations behind these changes are written down in documents. Despite this possible critique, documentary analysis is still

thought to be the best suited method in this thesis. Firstly, a large amount of documents regarding policy changes and their motivations is available and will be under study through documentary analysis. Secondly, the documents to be analyzed are coming from different sources with each their own interest. Sources include the NVAO – which has been open regarding to the diverging directions of quality assurance approaches of the Netherlands and Flanders –, as well as more critical, external sources such as external reviewers, policy documents published in parliamentary records and newspapers – which have analyzed the policy directions as well.

A large amount of documents from a wide variety of sources, with each their own interest, will be collected and analyzed. The documents to be collected and analyzed will be written by various actors which will all aim to a certain extent to either influence or execute the policy process. Therefore, strict selection requirements (see section 3.2.1) are necessary. Overall, it should be kept in mind that the actors who wrote the documents all had their own interests regarding to the policy process. Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that all actors wrote their documents for a certain public they had in mind. As the sources of the documents to be collected and analyzed, have all been trying to influence the policy process and/or executing the policy process, they should be critically reviewed. In this sense, it is also important that the documents to be selected will originate from a wide variety of sources, so that different actors (in)directly involved in the policy process, different interests regarding the policy process, and different persuasions regarding to the policy process, will all be included. By doing so, the most complete overview of actors, interests and persuasions could be used for analysis.

A documentary analysis is thought to be the best suited method for this thesis because of several reasons. A qualitative approach was chosen for this thesis since the research aim is qualitative by nature: the goal is to discover the underlying meanings of the separate developments of the Netherlands' and Flanders' quality assurance approaches. Furthermore, Marshall and Rossman (1995) suggested that qualitative research is designed to, amongst others, understand processes and understand differences between stated and implemented policies or theories. This thesis aims to understand a process, namely the process from convergence to divergence when it comes to the development of Dutch and Flemish higher education quality approaches. Also, this thesis aims to understand the difference between the

stated policy or policy aim (namely convergence of the Dutch and Flemish quality assurance approaches) and the eventually implemented policy (namely supporting the separate developments of the Dutch and Flemish quality assurance approaches by establishing two different departments). Thus, a qualitative approach is the most suitable research approach in this thesis and hereby quantitative research methods are eliminated. As mentioned before, within the qualitative approach a case study was chosen, so that the NVAO can be studied extensively in order to gain an insight in the factors which led to the apparent divergence of the Dutch and Flemish quality assurance approaches after a prior alleged convergence of both quality assurance approaches.

Thus, a qualitative case study is the design of this thesis. Several research methods could be applied to qualitative case studies, but interviews and documentary analysis are most common. Interviews could possibly enable the researcher to get in-depth knowledge regarding the development of the Dutch and Flemish quality assurance approaches by interviewing actors involved with the development. However, due to the sensitivity of the case and the fact that the institutionalization of divergence took place only very recently, interviews were thought to be less suitable. Documentary analysis was thought to be a very suitable research method for this qualitative case study instead. First of all, because there is a vast amount of documents concerning the development of the Dutch and Flemish quality assurance approaches between 2010 and 2017 available. Secondly, documentary analysis is thought to be a suitable research method because of the “immense value of documents in case study research (Bowen, 2009, p. 29). Thirdly, documentary analysis is seen as an excellent means for tracking change and development (Bowen, 2009) and thereby suits this thesis as this thesis researches the development of the Dutch and Flemish quality assurance approaches. Fourthly, “the strength of documents as a data source lies with the fact that they already exist in the situation; they do not intrude upon or alter the setting in ways that the presence of the investigator might. Nor are they dependent on human beings whose cooperation is essential for collecting data through interviews and observations” (Merriam, 2002, p. 13). Fifthly, documentary analysis is seen as suitable because of the sensitivity of the case and the recent developments.

3.2 DATA COLLECTION

As outlined before, a documentary analysis will be conducted in this thesis. Very important prerequisites of qualitative research methods (including documentary analysis), are that data collection techniques should be robust and that the research procedure should be documented (Bowen, 2009). Therefore, this section will further elaborate the data collection methods used in this research.

Since a documentary analysis will be conducted, documents are the source of data to be analyzed. Documents are seen as a rich source of data. However, one should look at documents “with a critical eye” (Bowen, 2009, p. 33). “Max Weber used the German term *verstehen* – understanding – in reference to an essential quality of (historical) social research. He meant that the researcher must be able to take on, mentally, the circumstances, views, and feelings of those being studied, so that the researcher can interpret their actions appropriately” (Babbie, 2013, p. 318). Practically, the analytical procedure of a documentary analysis consists of “finding, selecting, appraising (making sense of), and synthesizing data contained in documents” (Bowen, 2009, p. 28). Qualitative researchers are expected to draw upon multiple (minimal two) sources of evidence “to seek convergence and corroboration through the use of different data sources” (Bowen, 2009, p. 28). Thus, documents were collected based on the most important actors in the field of quality assurance approaches in the Netherlands and Flanders. The NVAO website itself provides a wide range of documents, including annual reports, strategy documents, and frameworks regarding to the quality assurance approaches in both the Netherlands and Flanders. Furthermore, policy documents published in parliamentary records in both the Netherlands and Flanders regarding to quality assurance approaches in higher education and their appendices were studied. Several external reports regarding to the NVAO have been collected as well. Finally, newspaper articles have been collected since they could provide a different perspective regarding to the NVAO. In total, 77 documents were collected to be analyzed (for overview see appendix C).

3.2.1 SELECTION REQUIREMENTS

Besides the wide range of sources from which the documents have been selected, they also needed to fulfill a number of selection requirements in order to enhance the quality of the selection of documents. First of all, the document should be from a relevant source. This

entails that the source should be involved with the policy process. The relevance of a source is very important to enhance the quality of the selection of the documents. Therefore, the source of the document should be involved with the policy process. For example, government reports, reports from respected (research) organizations, generally accepted reputable newspapers and so forth could be written by sources that are involved with the policy process. As mentioned before in section 3.1.3, the aim of the source in the policy process as well as the public for which the source was originally written should always be taken into account. Secondly, the selected document should be of relevance to the study. This entails that the document should assess a topic that is clearly in line with the research questions and aims, namely quality assurance approaches in the Netherlands and Flanders in the chosen period (2010-2017). Thirdly, saturation is an important requirement. "Saturation is the point in data collection when no new or relevant information emerges with respect to the newly constructed theory" (Saumure & Given, 2008, p. 195). It is important to collect sources representing different views regarding the topic in order to get the most complete view on the developments that are analyzed. Therefore, documents from a wide variety of sources (official/unofficial and so on) are collected. Saturation is considered to be very important in data collection. "The data collection process is considered to be complete only when saturation has been achieved" (Saumure & Given, 2008, p. 195). Finally, while selecting the documents, the original public for which the document was written should be taken into account. By taking this into account one can get a more complete overview regarding the views on the development of quality approaches in the Netherlands and Flanders.

3.3 DATA ANALYSIS

As mentioned in the data collection section, 77 documents were collected to be analyzed (see appendix C). Content analysis is the method that will be used in order to analyze the documents. Content analysis refers to "the study of recorded human communications, such as books, websites, paintings and laws" (Babbie, 2013, p. 295) and could thus also be applied to documents. Through the documentary analysis, the researcher is expected to yield data, such as abstracts, quotations or entire passages. The yielded data is then categorized into major themes specifically through content analysis (Bowen, 2009). "Content analysis is essentially a coding operation" (Babbie, 2013, p. 300). Coding can be described as "the process whereby raw data are transformed into a standardized form" (Babbie, 2013, p. 300). In

practice, this entails in this case that the documents will be coded or classified according to a conceptual framework based on possible factors that have previously been mentioned in the theoretical framework (Babbie, 2013).

As this thesis concerns a convergence-to-divergence development, it was of importance to create a timeline of the developments first. For each development, the most important findings were summarized (see chapter 4 and appendix A). By creating a timeline, an overview of the developments could be obtained. By replicating the timeline of the developments between 2010 and 2017 the first sub question could be answered and the importance of the theory and concept over time became clear.

Then, in order to further execute the content analysis, and thereby analyzing the selected documents, Atlas.ti will be used. Atlas.ti is qualitative data analysis software that “provides [...] very useful tools in academic research, particularly for social science disciplines” (Hwang, 2008, p. 519). When analyzing qualitative data, in this case documents, via Atlas.ti, several principles are followed. First of all, analyzing qualitative data via Atlas.it increases the objectivity of the research because it requires the researcher to establish the procedure of data analysis. Secondly, Atlas.ti enables the researcher to code the documents. Codes, all belonging to a code group, can be applied to relevant parts of the documents. Moreover, Atlas.ti enables the researcher to add codes during the coding process. Sometimes, codes that were not included in the initial theory could turn out to be relevant according to the data. Therefore, the ability to add codes during the coding process is useful. Also, Atlas.ti enables the researcher to explore co-occurrence coding. This entails that some parts of the qualitative data may be relevant to more than one code. The co-occurrence explorer enables the researcher to further explore which codes are often used simultaneously. This could lead to new insights regarding the relationship between several codes, or sometimes even code groups. Moreover, Atlas.it provides a clear and complete overview of all codes and all documents, when all documents are coded.

Before starting analyzing the data via Atlas.ti, code groups were distinguished. These code groups were based on the theoretical framework. The theoretical framework provided three possible theories and concepts which could possibly influence the convergence-divergence process. Thus, three code groups have been formed, namely: new public management,

institutional autonomy and quality procedures. By establishing three code groups based on the theory of new public management and the concepts institutional autonomy and quality assurance procedures, these theories and concepts which could possibly explain the development from convergence to divergence were operationalized. The theoretical framework thereby provided a theory and concepts which were thought to influence the development from convergence to divergence, and these theory and concepts were operationalized by forming them into code groups to analyze whether they would indeed have had an influence on the convergence to divergence process in this case study. Based on the description of the theory or concept as described in the theoretical framework, each code group was divided into several codes. During the coding process, codes that had not been included in the code groups yet but which appeared to be relevant according to multiple documents, could still be added inductively. By doing so, one could provide a more complete overview. The additional codes could give new insights about important sides of the code group that had not yet been included. For example, the first code group was 'new public management'. Based on the theoretical framework describing the new public management theory, codes such as 'reduced burden' and 'efficiency' belonged to the new public management code group and were coded. However, during the coding process 'customization' and 'financial position Flemish institutions' appeared to be relevant. These codes were added to the new public management code group as their link to new public management was clear and the documents showed that they were important factors regarding the development of Dutch and Flemish quality approaches but they had not been included in the description of the new public management theory. After every document was coded, all codes were analyzed in order to get an overview of the most frequent codes. These frequent codes and their explanations (based on the documents) for divergence were discussed. Furthermore, co-occurrences between codes were assessed via Atlas.ti. A part of a document could be coded with one code but also with multiple codes. Sometimes one part referred to multiple codes. Co-occurrence is a feature in Atlas.ti that gives an overview of the connections between codes. By assessing these connections between codes logical explanations for their connection – and sometimes for divergence – could be found. The difference between dependent and independent variables was clear: the factors (independent variables) that caused divergence or convergence (dependent variables) were coded. Codes were only applied if their connection with divergence or convergence was clear.

3.4 RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY

Despite the fact that the research method used in this thesis suits best to the study, there are several inherent limitations to the research method, data collection and data analysis which could influence the reliability and validity of this research. The reliability and validity of this research will therefore be further elaborated in this section.

3.4.1 RELIABILITY

Reliability refers to “the quality of measurement method that suggests that the same data would have been collected each time in repeated observations of the same phenomenon” (Babbie, 2013, p. 188). Qualitative researchers are therefore expected “to draw upon multiple (at least two) sources of evidence; that is, to seek convergence and corroboration through the use of different data sources and methods” (Bowen, 2009, p. 28). Since the selected research methodology in this research is documentary analysis, the source of data are documents. As mentioned before, different data sources have been used in order to seek convergence and corroboration. Moreover, data sources have been collected and analyzed until data saturation had been reached.

Furthermore, the reliability of this research has been enhanced in two more ways. First of all, the code groups and codes were derived from a theoretical framework. The theoretical framework comprised of a theory and concepts which had previously been mentioned as possible influencing factors regarding convergence to divergence developments. Secondly, the documents were formally coded via Atlas.ti. As mentioned before, Atlas.ti required the researcher to establish the procedure of data analysis. Thus, the establishment of the procedure of data analysis in Atlas.ti makes it possible to trace the data analysis and thereby the reliability is enhanced.

3.4.2 VALIDITY

“Validity refers to the legitimacy of the findings (i.e. how accurately the findings represent the truth in the objective world” (Venkatesh, Brown & Bala, 2013, p. 32). Whereas there are generally accepted guidelines for validation in quantitative research, this is not the case for qualitative research. “Qualitative research does not have guidelines or evaluation criteria for validation that are generally accepted and/or widely used” (Venkatesh, Brown & Bala, 2013, p. 33). Even though there is no consensus when it comes to validity measurements in

qualitative research, scholars have to some extent agreed that validity is essential in qualitative research as well in order to “reduce misunderstanding of qualitative research and to develop a common scientific body of knowledge” (Venkatesh, Brown & Bala, 2013, p. 34). Venkatesh, Brown & Bala (2013) have categorized different types of validity regarding to qualitative research based on prior research into three categories.

Firstly, there is the category ‘design validity’ which refers to “how well a qualitative study was designed and executed so that the findings are credible and transferable” (Venkatesh, Brown & Bala, 2013, p. 34). Enhancing the ‘design validity’ of this research has been taken into account in two ways. Firstly, as mentioned before “it is important to note here that qualitative research requires robust data collection techniques” (Bowen, 2009, p. 29). Thus, the data collection technique has been critically examined: data has been collected from a wide variety of qualitative sources and has been selected based on multiple requirements (see data collection section). Secondly, it has also been mentioned before that “detailed information about how the study was designed and conducted should be provided in the research report” (Bowen, 2009, p. 29). By providing detailed information regarding to both the design and the actual implementation of the study, one can judge how well the study has been designed and executed. Therefore an elaborated methodology section has been included in this study. As mentioned before, the codes used in the analysis were based on the theoretical framework. However, codes were inductively added when they appeared to be relevant for the study according to the documents analyzed. This could be a possible threat to the design validity of this research. However, all codes which were inductively added during the analysis were directly related to the code groups, and the code groups were based on the theoretical framework. Thus, the inductively added codes could be directly related to either new public management, institutional autonomy or quality assurance procedures. The inductively added codes were not included in the code groups before the analysis because based on the discussion in the theoretical framework, they did not seem to be prominent factors that could possibly influence the convergence to divergence process. However, they were added inductively during the analysis because according to the documents analyzed they did turn out to be influential. Despite the inductive coding during the analysis, there has not been such a threat to design validity because all concepts could be directly related to the main theory and concepts (on which the code groups were based).

Secondly, there is the category called 'inferential validity' which refers to "the quality of interpretation that reflects how well the findings can be confirmed or corroborated by others" (Venkatesh, Brown & Bala, 2013, p. 34). In order to enhance the inferential validity of this study, manifest content has been the focus during the content analysis. Manifest content refers to "the concrete terms contained in a communication" (Babbie, 2013, p. 201). By focusing primarily on the manifest content instead of latent content during the content analysis, the degree to which findings can be confirmed or corroborated by others will be increased. Moreover, the findings based on the analysis could be verified by others as the analysis was carefully recorded in Atlas.ti.

Furthermore, in order to enhance the validity of this research, documents have been selected from multiple data sources, including NVAO documents, external reports, letters to parliament, and newspapers. By collecting documents from such a wide variety of sources a more complete overview is given. Furthermore, as previously mentioned in the data collection section, the original purpose and the target audience of the selected document should be carefully considered. Documents from the NVAO itself might paint a different picture from the situation than for example newspapers and external reports, as these sources have different original purposes and target audiences. It could be expected, for example, that newspaper articles tend to be more critical regarding to the NVAO than the NVAO themselves. Thus, by collecting documents from such a wide range of data sources, a more complete and critical overview is given, and the validity of the research will be positively influenced by this.

4. A TIMELINE

In this chapter, the first sub question will be answered. The first sub question was: *“How have the quality assurance policies of the Netherlands and Flanders developed in the period 2010-2017?”* By reconstructing a timeline of the developments of the Dutch and Flemish quality assurance approaches in the described time period and the developments of the organization NVAO as a whole within the given time, a chronological overview of the developments will be sketched. For each subchapter, concerning one or more important developments in time, the most important factors will be summarized in a table below. In appendix A one can find a summary of these tables. By providing an overview of the most important factors causing the developments in each phase, an overview of the development of the factors will be given as well.

4.1 STARTING SITUATION (2010)

2010 marks the 5-year anniversary of the NVAO and thus the 5-year anniversary of the bi-national cooperation of the Netherlands and Flanders when it comes to quality assurance in higher education. The NVAO reflects positively (though briefly) on the first five years of bi-national cooperation in its annual report of 2010 and underlines that the content of the accreditation systems are “largely tied” to each other (NVAO, 2011). Despite these positive findings, several factors that could eventually lead to divergence could already been identified during the starting situation in 2010.

The first notable finding is that the accreditation systems of the Netherlands and Flanders have not been implemented parallel. Already during the starting situation both systems are in different phases. In 2010, a new accreditation system was implemented in the Netherlands, which was said to carry “wide support” (NVAO, 2011, p. 9). By contrast, the implementation of a new accreditation system for Flanders is lagging behind due to “a different phase structure in the initial stage” (NVAO, 2011, p. 9). Which is remarkable since it is also stressed that the preparation of the Netherlands’ accreditation system was very comprehensive, taking at least two years including pilots in 2008 and comprehensive consultations with the Dutch higher education sector in 2009 (*‘poldermodel’*) leading to a “maximum consensus” among all parties involved (NVAO, 2011, p. 9). The different phases of the accreditation systems of the Netherlands and Flanders are acknowledged in the NVAO’s 2010 annual report but it is also

stressed that despite the Flanders' different phase structure in the initial phase "there is, however, ample consensus regarding its points of departure, which are in line with the Dutch situation" (NVAO, 2011, p. 9).

Secondly, it seems that the culture of the Dutch and the Flemish higher education sector (slightly) differs. This presumption is based on several different attitudes towards quality assurance approaches. The cultural differences can be illustrated by for example the offering and permission of new programs. "Whereas the Netherlands occasionally conveys the impression of converting each and every social trend or change into a new program, and as a result, developing a great skill in that area, Flemish institutions still tend to adopt a tentative stance" (NVAO, 2011, p. 22). Differences regarding internationalization of higher education (a top priority of the NVAO) can be observed as well. Internationalization and interculturality are featured much more in Dutch higher education than in Flemish higher education (NVAO, 2011). In Flanders; "although the need for internationalization is fully endorsed, the steps taken towards the meaningful internationalization of higher education are relatively small" (NVAO, 2011, p. 22). Finally, differences regarding the innovation of higher education can be observed as well. Flemish universities of applied science have a stronger focus on knowledge whereas Dutch universities of applied science have a stronger focus on competences (NVAO, 2012). Overall, the culture in the Dutch higher education sector seems to be relatively progressive (or more 'fluid') whereas the culture in the Flemish higher education sector seems to be relatively conservative (or more 'solid'). The Dutch higher education sector seems to be more open and proactive towards innovation whereas the Flemish higher education sector seems to be more careful.

Convergent signs: positive evaluation 5-year anniversary (intention to further develop /strengthen cooperation), content accreditation systems (are said to be 'largely tied')

Divergent signs: different phases accreditation systems (NL accreditation system further developed than FL accreditation system), cultural differences (NL relatively progressive versus FL relatively conservative)

4.2 SCANDALS IN THE NETHERLANDS AND DISTRUST

In its annual report of 2011 the NVAO stated that 2011 revolved around two key issues: implementation of the Netherlands' new accreditation system and the discussions regarding the development of Flanders' new accreditation system on the one hand and the repeated

unveiled scandals concerning universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands on the other hand (NVAO, 2012).

In 2010 and 2011 several shortcomings regarding the quality and quality assurance of Dutch universities of applied science were unveiled. After media reports concerning 'alternative graduation trajectories' at the Dutch university of applied sciences InHolland, the Dutch Education Inspectorate started an investigation. Private higher education institutions and universities were left out of the investigation as there were no signs of shortcomings there (Tweede Kamer, 2012). The Inspectorate eventually investigated 15 bachelor degrees of 10 public higher education institutions and found that all bachelor degrees did not comply with the graduation regulations as written down in the '*Wet op het hoger onderwijs en wetenschappelijk onderzoek (WHW)*' (Tweede Kamer, 2012). Furthermore, the Inspectorate found that dozens of students of one specific university of applied sciences obtained their degree wrongly (Tweede Kamer, 2012).

The scandals regarding quality in Dutch higher education led to an intense public and political debate. "The fact that doubt could be shed on the legality and legitimacy of qualifications that had been awarded was especially shocking" (NVAO, 2012, p. 9). This did not only have negative consequences for the students involved, but also for the remaining students, the higher education institutions, and credibility and prestige of the Dutch higher education sector in general.

Besides the concerns regarding the quality of Dutch higher education as a result of these findings there were also concerns regarding the Dutch quality assurance system, since the quality shortcomings were unveiled only as a result of media reports – not as a result of the quality assurance as it was supposed to. By some, the Dutch accreditation system was even called "an expensive show for the public" (De Volkskrant, 2011, p. 1). "Politicians and society voiced serious concerns about this and measures were sought to prevent such incidents from recurring in the future wherever possible" (NVAO, 2012, p. 9).

The responsible State Secretary of Education, Halbe Zijlstra, admitted that the accreditation system was not functioning well "not only because of the current situation but also because of the recent history in which it has occurred several times, and sometimes also in a broad sense, that the compliance with rules and the provision of quality education did not succeed

at universities of applied sciences”³ (Tweede Kamer, 2010, p. 6). Furthermore, he added that “the government in the past had given the institutions a chance to prove themselves again”⁴(Tweede Kamer, 2010, p. 6).

After the unveiled shortcomings in 2010, shortcomings were also unveiled in 2011. This led to an even more intense public and political debate, increased quality concerns for Dutch higher education and an even worse image of higher education quality in the Netherlands. The public and political debate demanded stricter accreditation systems in order to prevent further shortcomings in Dutch higher education. As a result of a call from politicians and society for more regulations, additional measures were implemented which generally implied a more stringent supervision and less autonomy for and trust in the institutions (NVAO, 2012). By contrast, in Flanders there have not been scandals regarding the quality of higher education and thus there has been a much more quiet public and political debate regarding the accreditation system. Logically, the public and political debate also did not focus so much on quality concerns. Instead, it focused more on the (administrative) burden.

During these divergent developments, there was also a convergent development. There seemed to be convergence when analyzing the developments of the universities of applied sciences in Flanders and the Netherlands. Flemish universities of applied science had a stronger focus on knowledge whereas Dutch universities of applied science had a stronger focus on competences. In 2011, the usually more conservative Flemish universities of applied sciences focused more on competences whereas Dutch universities of applied sciences focused more on knowledge as a reaction to the unveiled shortcomings regarding the achieved learning outcomes of students.

Convergent signs: focus of education at universities of applied sciences (FL: from more knowledge-based to more competencies-based, NL: from more competencies-based to more knowledge-based)

Divergent signs: image higher education (negative in NL due to scandals, no scandals and not such a negative image in FL), stringency of regulation (more stringent regulations in the NL than in FL because of scandals, less autonomy in the NL because of scandals)

³ Translated from Dutch: “Niet alleen gezien de huidige situatie maar ook gezien de recente geschiedenis waarin verschillende keren en soms ook in brede zin moest geconstateerd worden dat in het hbo het naleven van regels en het bieden van kwalitatief goed onderwijs niet is gelukt

⁴ Translated from Dutch: “In het verleden heeft de overheid de instellingen de kans gegeven om zich opnieuw te bewijzen”

4.3 2013: CRACKS APPEAR

When one wants to create a high-quality higher education sector there are several aspects to be taken into account. They range from guaranteeing quality via quality assurance to the improvement of quality and development (NVAO, 2014). Accreditation systems consist of these components. The composition of these components within an accreditation system are dependent on the stage of development of the current higher education sector. In 2013, the accreditation system of the Netherlands and Flanders were in different stages. “The Dutch and Flemish systems mirror their juncture in time” (NVAO, 2014, p. 5). According to NVAO-chair Anne Flierman, for each phase one should find the balance between ‘regulation’ and ‘trust’. Thus, the balance between ‘regulation’ and ‘trust’ was different for the Netherlands and Flanders.

In 2013, a new accreditation system was implemented in Flanders with an increased focus on the content of higher education and on the quality culture of institutions. According to Ann Demeulemeester, vice-chair of the NVAO, the new accreditation “focused on the core principles, on the substance of the quality of the education policy and the quality-oriented culture” (NVAO, 2014, p. 9). In its annual report of 2013, the NVAO projects that in the near future the accreditation system will be developed into the next phase with increased attention for reducing burden.

In the Netherlands, the accreditation system had been evaluated. In 2013 some additional stringent measures have been added to the accreditation system via legislature (NVAO, 2014). This is a divergent element compared to Flanders. As a result of the scandals in Dutch higher education in 2010 and 2011, society and politicians called for more stringent regulation of higher education. Therefore, additional stringent measures were added to the accreditation system via legislature (top-down). The overall evaluation of the accreditation system is positive. Furthermore, there is increased awareness for the importance of quality culture in institutions.

The aforementioned developments of the Netherlands’ and Flanders’ accreditation systems clearly show the different phases in which both accreditation systems are. In Flanders, the balance between ‘regulation’ and ‘trust’ relies more on ‘trust’. Because of trust in the Flemish higher education sector, the component of ‘improving quality and development’ is more

present than the component 'guaranteeing quality'. Overall, there is trust in the quality (and guarantee of the quality) of the Flemish higher education system which leaves more space for a focus on improvement instead of guaranteeing the basic quality. As a result of the relative focus on 'trust' instead of 'regulation', institutions gain more autonomy as well. In the Netherlands, the balance between 'regulation' and 'trust' relies more on 'regulation'. This can be illustrated by the additional measures and more stringent measures regarding quality assurance via legislature. As a result of the scandals in 2010 and 2011, politicians reacted with increased regulation to guarantee quality. The scandals have led to distrust instead of trust in the accreditation system of the Netherlands and the quality of the higher education sector in general.

Overall, the Flemish accreditation system is further developed than the Netherlands' accreditation system. The Flemish accreditation system is already in a 'next phase' with a stronger focus on the improvement of quality instead of the basic guarantee of quality. "Flanders is taking a big step in the accreditation system and the Netherlands could learn from this later on"⁵ (ScienceGuide, 2013, p. 1).

In line with the developments in 2013, the board of the NVAO has specified its strategy. Key points are improving the consistency and accessibility of quality assurance reports, increasing awareness regarding the importance of quality culture, and broadening its perspective via internationalization "such that it benefits from the extra value afforded by the cooperation between the Netherlands and Flanders" (NVAO, 2014, p. 5). Moreover, the NVAO dedicates itself to continuously increasing the support for and the trust in the accreditation systems. The main principle here is "well-founded trust" (NVAO, 2014). Overall, despite the cracks that appeared (namely the different stages of the development of the higher education sector – leading to different balances between 'trust' and 'regulation'), in its 2013 annual report, the

⁵ Translated from Dutch: "Vlaanderen zet een grote stap in het accreditatiestelsel en Nederland kan daar straks van leren"

NVAO is clearly searching for convergent themes, such as transparency, quality culture, ‘well-founded trust’, internationalization and reduced administrative burden.

Convergent signs: annual report 2013 searches for convergent themes

Divergent signs: stage of development current higher education sector (FL higher education sector further developed than NL higher education sector), balance between ‘trust’ and ‘regulation’ (FL: focus more on ‘trust’, NL: focus more on ‘regulation’)

4.4 FORMATION NEW CABINET FLANDERS: CENTRALIZING TRUST AND AUTONOMY IN FLEMISH HIGHER EDUCATION

Both in the Netherlands and Flanders there are debates about the development of the current accreditation systems. These debates focus on the concepts of ‘trust’ and ‘reduced burden’ (NVAO, 2015).

In 2014 Hilde Crevits, the new Flemish minister on Educational Affairs part of the newly inaugurated government Bourgeois, set up a taskforce with the involved actors with the aim to review the current quality assurance and accreditation system in Flemish higher education. Consequently, the accreditation system was simplified and focused on trusting the institutions and increasing the institutional autonomy of Flemish institutions – which was in line with the wishes of the Flemish higher education sector. The main concept for the taskforce was ‘quality culture’. The shift towards more trust in the Flemish higher education sector and more autonomy for Flemish higher education institutions after the formation of a new Flemish cabinet is not surprising. The new minister on Educational Affairs, Hilde Crevits, is a member of the cabinet party CD&V which states in its election program: “CD&V gives its trust to and cooperates with strong school- and institutional boards who have autonomy of and responsibility for the way in which they organize and offer education”⁶ (CD&V, 2014, p. 126). Furthermore, in its election program the CD&V also stated that it aimed for “deregulation, and a strong, non-stifling quality assurance and reduced administrative burden for the teachers

⁶ Translated from Dutch: “CD&V geeft zijn vertrouwen aan en werkt samen met sterke school- en instellingbesturen, die autonomie hebben over en verantwoordelijkheid nemen voor de manier waarop ze onderwijs organiseren en aanbieden” (CD&V, p. 126)

and the board”⁷ (CD&V, 2014, p. 127). Also, the CD&V stated that it wanted to “confirm its trust in boards that take their responsibility”⁸ (CD&V, 2014, p. 127).

In the Netherlands, “the Quality in Diversity Act, the Strengthening Quality Guarantees Act, the evaluation of the accreditation system by NVAO itself, and studies conducted by the Court of Audit Belgium, the Dutch State Audit Office and the Education Inspectorate have induced NVAO to revise its assessment frameworks in the year under review and discuss adaptation with stakeholders” (NVAO, 2014, p. 2). In the Netherlands, the accreditation system remains based on program accreditation. Thus, that the quality accreditation will be based on the educational programs instead of the institution itself. Even though the quality assurance of the institutions themselves will also be reviewed, the focus of the Dutch accreditation system remained at the program-level.

By contrast, the Flemish accreditation system will “combine accreditation on institutional level combined with a limited program accreditation”⁹ according to Ann Demeulemeester, vice chair of the NVAO (ScienceGuide, 2013, p. 1). In this new Flemish accreditation system, institutions gain autonomy in general but also in the accreditation procedure because “the institution will choose its own focus”¹⁰ (ScienceGuide, 2013, p. 2). The idea behind the new Flemish accreditation system is that “the focus changes from ‘a system’ of attention for procedures towards quality culture in institutions and the whole higher education area”¹¹ (ScienceGuide, 2013, p. 2). The focus on institutional accreditation was widely supported by the Flemish higher education sector, which demanded that “an institutional review should be sufficient” (ScienceGuide, 2014, p.1) and that a more stringent accreditation system “exudes distrust” (ScienceGuide, 2014, p.1).

⁷ Translated from Dutch: “We willen deregulering, een sterke, niet-verstikkende kwaliteitsbewaking en een daling van de administratieve werklast voor leerkrachten en directie (CD&V, p. 127)

⁸ Translated from Dutch: “Zijn vertrouwen bevestigen in schoolbesturen die hun verantwoordelijkheid opnemen” (CD&V, p. 127).

⁹ Translated from Dutch: “De accreditatie op instellingsniveau wordt gecombineerd met een beperkte opleidingsaccreditatie” (ScienceGuide, 2013, p.1)

¹⁰ Translated from Dutch: “de instelling zal hierbij haar eigen zwaartepunt kiezen en accenten leggen” (ScienceGuide, 2013, p.2).

¹¹ Translated from Dutch: “het accent verschuift zo van ‘een systeem’ van aandacht voor procedures naar de kwaliteitscultuur in instellingen en het gehele HO-bestel” (ScienceGuide, 2013, p.2).

In its annual report of 2014, the NVAO states that it will continue to focus on reducing burden in the accreditation systems of both the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO, 2015). Furthermore, the NVAO aims to increase the support for the accreditation systems in the next year based on the principle “well-founded trust”.

Convergent signs: principle ‘well-founded trust’

Divergent signs: accreditation systems (focus on institutions/institutional review in FL, focus on programs/program review in NL), trust (more trust in FL than NL), autonomy (more autonomy for FL institutions than NL institutions), governmental control/view (governmental control FL; more freedom for institutions/higher education sector; governmental control NL: stringent measures to guarantee quality)

4.5 INCREMENTALISM IN THE NETHERLANDS

Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, the debate regarding the strictness and scope of the quality assurance system was largely shaped by a letter to parliament from the Minister of Education, Jet Bussemaker, titled ‘*Accreditatie op maat*’. In this letter of 1 June 2015, minister Bussemaker outlined the framework within which the accreditation system will be further developed. The minister stressed that she is responsible for the accreditation system and has possibilities to intervene in response to serious risks “but that should not entail that as a result of incidents new legislation will be implemented which affects the whole sector and puts too much pressure on the space for education”¹² (Tweede Kamer, 2015, p. 3). In this quote she refers to the additional, more stringent regulations which were implemented by the then State Secretary Halbe Zijlstra in response to the incidents at Dutch universities of applied sciences in 2010 and 2011 (see 4.2 Scandals in the Netherlands and distrust). At the time, society and politicians called for additional, more stringent regulations to prevent shortcomings in the future. Over the years, the view on regulations in higher education quality assurance changed as the higher education sector gained trust again. “Legislation can provide preconditions for good education but cannot take care of it”¹³ (Tweede Kamer, 2015, p. 4). Instead, the educational community takes care of good education. A good quality culture will encourage discussions within the educational community regarding the improvement of higher

¹² Translated from Dutch: “[...] dat mag niet betekenen dat er als gevolg van incidenten nieuwe wetgeving komt die de hele sector raakt en de ruimte voor het onderwijs te zeer onder druk zet” (Tweede Kamer, 2015, p. 3)

¹³ Translated from Dutch: “Regelgeving kan randvoorwaarden bieden voor goed onderwijs, maar niet daarvoor zorgdragen” (Tweede Kamer, 2015, p. 4)

education. In her letter, the minister announces that she will deviate from the policy of the last decades by her focus from regulation towards quality culture.

Furthermore, the minister underlines the importance of space for education, quality culture, ownership and trust. When it comes to space for education, the minister noted that “if we want to create space for educational innovation and responsiveness, there should also be space to make mistakes and recover them”¹⁴ (Tweede Kamer, 2015, p. 3). The underlying thought is that the increased legislation has narrowed higher education institution’s possibilities to pursue educational innovation and to respond to a rapidly changing external environment. By reducing legislation again, and shift focus to quality culture, space for education will be created and higher education institutions will have more opportunities to pursue educational innovation and to respond to their external environment. When it comes to ownership, the minister states that “I am convinced that when lecturers and administrators experience more ownership of the quality and quality assurance of education, and are familiar with it, the system will encourage improvements” (Tweede Kamer, 2015, p. 8). Furthermore, the minister states that trust will play a central role in the fundamental changes announced in the new framework: “I want an accreditation system that has been shaped more based on trust”¹⁵ (Tweede Kamer, 2015, p. 5). By centralizing trust in the framework for a new accreditation system, the emergence of a good quality culture, in which fruitful discussions among the educational community can take place, will be encouraged. The educational community will experience more ‘ownership’ of education and therefore feel more free to discuss educational improvement. Furthermore, increased trust will enable more space for education which will improve higher education institution’s possibilities to pursue educational innovation and to be responsive.

The letter to parliament also addresses the differentiation in Dutch higher education, administrative burden and an institutional review pilot. First of all, it has been determined by the NVAO that there is a lot of differentiation in Dutch higher education regarding size, degrees offered and financing. However, it has also been determined that the accreditation system is able to accommodate these differences. More possibilities for customization in the

¹⁴ Translated from Dutch: “Als we ruimte willen maken voor onderwijsinnovatie en responsiviteit, moet er ook ruimte zijn om fouten te maken en die te herstellen” (Tweede Kamer, 2015, p. 5)

¹⁵ Translated from Dutch: “Ik wil een accreditatiestelsel dat meer vorm is gegeven vanuit vertrouwen”

accreditation system is seen as an important development for the future. Second of all, the Dutch Inspectorate for Education has pointed out that the experienced burden are in part created by the higher education institutions themselves. It turns out that higher education institutions tend to produce much more documentation than minimally required because they are afraid to lose their accreditation or experience a culture of fear (?). “More clarity about the minimum administrative requirements in the accreditation process can contribute to a reduction of experienced burden and increase the feeling of ownership”¹⁶ (Tweede Kamer, 2015, p. 22). As of 2017, the minister intends to start an institutional review pilot. The aim of this institutional review pilot is twofold. On the one side, to test the instrument of institutional review which is becoming more and more popular internationally, on the other side, to provide perspective for institutions with good track records. The first round of the pilot will be started in 2017, the second round of the pilot will be started in 2018 or 2019 and the pilot will be evaluated in 2020 or 2021.

There has been criticism on the new framework for a higher education accreditation system as described above, especially regarding the institutional review pilot. When confronted with skepticism regarding whether the higher education institutions and programs are able to manage freedom after the scandals in 2010 and 2011, minister Bussemaker stated “the question is whether it helps to make the whole system more stringent, so people are afraid of the inspections and show strategic behavior”¹⁷ (Trouw, 2015, p. 2). Furthermore, minister Bussemaker defended her new framework outline by stating “I find it undesirable that programs keep track of all sorts of paperwork out of uncertainty and at the same time feel that it is useless to them”¹⁸ (Trouw, 2015, p. 2). Furthermore, the Dutch student union (Lsvb) was skeptic about the institutional review pilot because this would entail that for the institutions involved, not the programs but the whole institution will be assessed. This makes it impossible to compare programs of different universities they argued. Furthermore, they claim that it is too early to give higher education institutions so much freedom as some of the

¹⁶ Translated from Dutch: “Meer helderheid over de minimale administratieve vereisten in het accreditatieproces kunnen bijdragen aan een vermindering van ervaren lasten en het gevoel van eigenaarschap vergroten” (Tweede Kamer, 2015, p. 22).

¹⁷ Translated from Dutch: “[...] het is de vraag of het helpt om dan het hele systeem strenger te maken, waardoor mensen bang zijn voor de keuringen en strategisch gedrag gaan tonen” (Trouw, 2015, p. 2)

¹⁸ Translated from Dutch: “Ik vind het onwenselijk dat opleidingen uit onzekerheid allerlei papierwerk bijhouden, en tegelijkertijd het gevoel hebben dat ze er niets aan hebben” (Trouw, 2015, p. 2)

potential participants of the pilot still had programs with quality shortcomings in the previous years. According to the Lsvb spokesperson the problem of experienced burden due to the higher education institutions themselves instead of the accreditation system: “only because they (higher education institutions) are afraid to lose their accreditation, they put a lot of work in it [...] the problem lies with the universities and universities of applied science, not with the way of accreditation”¹⁹ (Trouw, 2015, p. 2).

Convergent signs: shift towards institutional review Netherlands (by starting institutional review pilot)

Divergent signs: reasoning behind centralizing trust in the accreditation system (space for education: educational innovation and responsiveness; ownership), distrust from students regarding institutional review, ‘culture of fear’ among higher education institutions in accreditation process

4.6 AGREE TO DISAGREE

In 2016, the NVAO focused on developing its route for the 2017-2020 period. The Committee of Ministers requested the NVAO to outline “a new vision for the organization’s future with associated organizational changes” (NVAO, 2017, p. 2). In 2016, it became clear that the (then) current organizational structure should be changed so it could cope with the different routes of the Netherlands’ and Flanders’ accreditation systems. The request of the Committee of Ministers shows that the divergence of the accreditation systems and the divergence within the organization of the NVAO have reached the minister-level. It became clear that the organizational structure should be adapted to the different accreditation systems, cultures and political environment. Therefore, the NVAO announced that it would continue as a binational organization but with two departments: a Dutch department and a Flemish department. This organizational change as a result of divergence could be seen as institutionalization of divergence.

Convergent signs: reduction of convergence by maintaining one single board of the NVAO (and not separating the NVAO organization itself)

Divergent signs: institutionalization of divergence (changes in NVAO organization, split: Dutch department and Flemish department)

¹⁹ Translated from Dutch: “Alleen omdat ze bang zijn de accreditatie niet te krijgen, maken ze er veel te veel werk van. Het probleem ligt bij de universiteiten en hogescholen, niet bij de manier van accrediteren” (Trouw, 2015, p. 2)

5 ANALYSIS IN TERMS OF CONVERGENCE, DIVERGENCE AND THEIR DRIVERS

In this chapter, the second sub question will be answered. The second sub question was formulated as: *“What are possible diverging factors regarding to quality assurance approaches?”* This sub question will be answered through code analysis as explained in chapter 3.3 *Data analysis*. All the selected documents have been coded. In this chapter the code groups and their codes will be analyzed. The code groups are based on the theoretical framework. Code groups have been assigned to sections of the theoretical framework. Each code group consists of multiple codes based on the theoretical framework, complemented with codes inductively added during the analysis of documents. The most important codes, the co-occurrences of the codes and the findings will be discussed in this section.

5.1 CODE GROUP: NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

New Public Management can be freely described as implementing private sector mechanisms in (semi-)public sector organizations with the goal to make these more efficient. The most important codes, their coherence with other codes and their context will now be discussed.

5.1.1 REDUCED BURDEN AND REDUCED ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN

The results of the coding process clearly indicate that both ‘reduced burden’ and ‘reduced administrative burden’ are seen as important factors regarding quality assurance in higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders. ‘Reduced burden’ has been coded 81 times and ‘reduced administrative burden’ has been coded 61 times. Even though these codes seem to be fairly similar reduced administrative burden specifically refers to the administrative part, whereas reduced burden does not refer to a specific kind of burden. This unspecified burden could refer to the administrative part but also for example to the financial part.

The educational institutions in both the Netherlands and Flanders experience a lot of (administrative) burden in carrying out the accreditation process. It is notable that reducing (administrative) burden has been a key issue over the whole analyzed time period. From 2010 to 2017 the educational institutions have repeatedly complained about the burden they experience while carrying out the accreditation procedures. Also, in this period the NVAO has stressed multiple times that reducing (administrative) burden – and thus making the system more efficient – remains one of their main aims after repeated complaints from the higher education sector. In 2012, the self-evaluation report of the NVAO stated that “the ministers

put great emphasis on a necessary reduction of the bureaucratic burden, without any concessions being made to the international legitimacy of the system” (NVAO Self-evaluation report, 2012, p. 12). The aforementioned quote shows that in both the Netherlands and Flanders reducing bureaucratic burden is acknowledged as being a priority. However, it also clearly states that this should not affect the international legitimacy of the quality assurance system in higher education. This could be seen as a very sensitive matter, especially in the Netherlands: the experienced burden, the amount of criticism and the main critics have differed between the Netherlands and Flanders and over time for two reasons.

In the Netherlands, shortcomings in the quality of universities of applied sciences were unveiled in 2010 and 2011. This scandal led to an intense public and political debate, distrust in Dutch higher education institutions, and a call for more stringent regulations in the Dutch accreditation system. These additional, more stringent regulations were partly imposed from a political level via the then State Secretary. The additional regulations led to a more bureaucratic accreditation system. Subsequently, the experienced burden was high but because of the recent scandals and the distrust in the Dutch higher education sector there was little support for complaints about the increased administrative burden. Over time, the view on the added, more stringent regulations which led to increased administrative burden changed. As the Dutch higher education sector regained trust over the years, the complaints from the Dutch higher education sector increased as well. This criticism was partly acquired by Dutch politicians. In 2015, the Minister of Education, Jet Bussemaker, announced a new framework for the accreditation system focusing mainly on reducing burden. The new framework stated that the added, stringent regulations went too far and limited the ‘space for education’ (and subsequently the possibilities for educational innovation and responsiveness) and ‘ownership of education’ of lecturers, administrators and students. Furthermore, it was acknowledged that the severe administrative burden as a result of the added regulations did not promote a quality culture but instead led to a culture of distrust and fear. At the same time, student unions and some political parties voiced their concerns regarding measures to reduce administrative burden as they were convinced that the Dutch higher education sector was not ready for more freedom yet. Furthermore, they stated that the problem lies in the Dutch higher education sector itself instead of the accreditation system

since Dutch higher education institutions tends to develop a lot more documentation than needed for accreditation out of fear to lose their accreditation.

In Flanders, there has historically been a different culture in the higher education sector than in the Netherlands. The general thought among Flemish higher education institutions was that they deserved trust based on their previous accomplishments regarding quality assurance and that they thus did not need to substantiate their quality and quality assurance via lots of documents and a very bureaucratic procedure. Political developments contributed to the amount of criticism and critics on the administrative burden. In 2014, the Flemish government announced budget cuts for the Flemish higher education sector. Critics, such as Rik Torfs, stated that universities were underfinanced and that budget cuts in combination with the ever demanding administrative burden were improper. Shortly after, when the new cabinet was inaugurated, the complaints regarding the lack of trust in the Flemish higher education sector and the administrative burden were heard by politics and the Flemish institutions were given more trust and less administrative requirements.

In sum, both the Netherlands and Flanders have stressed over time that reducing (administrative) burden is a priority. However, as the contexts of the Dutch and Flemish higher education differed, this led to different levels of supervision. As shortcomings were unveiled in Dutch higher education in 2010 and 2011 there was a loud call for more stringent supervision by the public and politicians. This call led to more (and more stringent) regulations in the accreditation system implemented by State Secretary for Education, Halbe Zijlstra (Tweede Kamer, 2012) – leading inherently to more (administrative) burden. By contrast, there was not such a call for more stringent supervision in the Flanders.

According to the Atlas.ti co-occurrence explorer, the code 'reduced administrative burden' was most often coded along with 'reduced burden' (16x). This finding was to be expected, as 'reduced administrative burden' refers to a more specific form of 'reduced burden'. Furthermore, 'reduced administrative burden' was most often coded along with 'cost-benefit' (code group New Public Management) and 'trust' (code group institutional autonomy). The co-occurrence of 'reduced administrative burden' and 'cost-benefit' can be explained in the sense that the general thought is that by reducing administrative burden the accreditation system could be more beneficial for the institutions. Or, in other words, by reducing the

administrative burden the 'cost' of the accreditation system would decrease, leading to a different cost-benefit balance. Especially in Flanders there were doubts about whether the accreditation system would be beneficial enough compared to its burden. Reducing administrative burden and thereby making the accreditation system more beneficial for both educational institutions and the quality assurance panels are repeatedly mentioned. The co-occurrence of 'reduced administrative burden' and 'trust' could be explained in the following way. Over the years, the concept of 'earned trust' became more popular in both the Dutch and Flemish accreditation system. This concept entailed that the accreditation systems reduced the administrative requirements in the accreditation process as the institutions got more autonomy because they 'earned trust' based on proven previous quality. An interesting remark is that both codes belong to different code groups. As mentioned before, 'reduced administrative burden' belongs to the code group new public management. The code 'trust' belongs to the code group institutional autonomy. The co-occurrence of these codes direct to combined new public management and institutional autonomy motives.

According to the Atlas.ti co-occurrence explorer, the code 'reduced burden' was most often coded along with 'reduced administrative burden' as explained before. Furthermore, 'reduced burden' was most often coded along with 'trust' (11x) and 'cost-benefit' (9x). The most striking co-occurrences are, as expected, with the same codes as with the code 'reduced administrative burden'.

5.1.2 CUSTOMIZATION

'Customization' has been coded 69 times. Even though customization was not part of the initial theoretical framework it has been added during the coding process because the documentation often referred to customization. Customization is thought to belong to the New Public Administration code group as the context of customization is that being able to customize during the accreditation process or being able to customize the accreditation systems of the Netherlands and Flanders enhances the efficiency. Both in the Netherlands and Flanders one can see a trend of increasing interest regarding customization. This often entails that educational institutions are given more freedom during the accreditation process. Instead of being assessed by the quality assurance panels based on generally put descriptions, institutions put forward their own context and strategy. Their context and strategy will then

be seen as the 'starting point' to assess quality. Often mentioned in line with customization is the so-called 'open dialogue'. In the future, customization is thought to remain important:

'Customization' has often been coded along with 'Autonomy Dutch institutions' (12x) and 'Autonomy Flemish institutions' (11x). This is thought to be a logical result as customization requires more freedom in the accreditation system. In other words, the accreditation system has to become less strict in order to allow customization. Then, institutions can be accredited based on their (customized) context and strategy. Institutions are given more autonomy in the process by underlining the 'starting points' of the 'open dialogue' during the accreditation process. The co-occurrence of the code 'customization' with 'Autonomy Dutch institutions' and 'Autonomy Flemish institutions' confirms that in both the Netherlands and Flanders customization has become an important concept in quality accreditation systems.

Furthermore, 'customization' has been coded along with 'quality culture' for 11 times. This co-occurrence can be explained from two levels. Firstly, this is in line with the thought that the institutions' own quality culture will become the starting point of the accreditation process. Every institution is able to demonstrate their own, unique quality culture during the accreditation process because the accreditation systems have become less static and more dynamic. The more open, dynamic accreditation system allows and encourages higher education institutions in both the Netherlands and Flanders to further develop their quality culture. Secondly, the co-occurrence of 'customization' and 'quality culture' can also be explained from a higher level. As the Dutch and Flemish higher education sector each had their own context the divergence, as symbolized by the creation of a Dutch department and a Flemish department, would enable the NVAO and the accreditation system to adjust to these different contexts and thereby making the overall accreditation process more efficient.

5.1.3 COST-BENEFIT

'Cost-benefit' has been coded for 26 times. What has been most notable regarding 'cost-benefit' codes in the analyzed documents, is that in most cases there was critique from the Flemish side regarding the cost-benefit of the accreditation system. Both in the official reports and in the unofficial newspaper articles, critique on the cost-benefit of the quality assurance systems originated mostly from the Flemish higher education sector in general or important actors within this Flemish higher education sector.

In its annual report of 2017, the NVAO also acknowledged the cost-benefit concerns of the Flemish higher education sector. “After three decades of program assessment and accreditation, the efforts required in this respect were found to outweigh the remaining added value in terms of promoting educational quality. In this context, NVAO sought an approach that would afford the institutions greater autonomy and ownership of the quality of their programs. The aim was to develop – in collaboration with the government, institutions, and students – an assessment procedure that would be more responsive to the context of the individual institutions, while concurrently entailing a distinct added value for the institution” (Unity in diversity – Annual Report 2017, 2017, p. 16). Based on this quotation²⁰ it is assumed that increased customization and institutional autonomy would eventually lead to an improved cost-benefit results for the institutions involved.

The fact that the issue of cost-benefit is acknowledged as being important in mostly Flanders can be illustrated by the fact that the code ‘cost-benefit’ has been co-occurred multiple times with the code ‘Autonomy Flemish institutions’ but has not been coded along with the code ‘Autonomy Dutch institutions’. The code ‘cost-benefit’ has also been coded relatively often with the codes ‘reduced burden’ and ‘reduced administrative burden’. This can be explained since the complaints regarding a negative cost-benefit are often based on the high costs of (administrative) burden that comes along with the accreditation process. Furthermore, ‘cost-benefit’ has often been coded along with the code ‘efficiency’ since increasing the cost-benefit of the accreditation system is intertwined with increasing the efficiency of the accreditation system. Also, as expected based on the previous quote, ‘cost-benefit’ has often been coded along with ‘customization’.

5.1.4 REMAINING CODES

Besides the aforementioned most important codes in the code group New Public Management, some remaining codes which are thought to be less important regarding the factors leading towards eventual divergence but which can illustrate the context of both higher education systems will be shortly discussed here.

The code ‘innovation’ has been applied 8 times. Regarding innovation it is notable that in Flanders the higher education sector seems to be much more reluctant than the Dutch higher

²⁰ The quotation refers to the results of the first round of institutional reviews in Flanders

education sector. This can be illustrated by the more reserved attitude of the Flemish education sector when it comes to education reforms. For example, from focusing on knowledge towards focusing on competences as well. Furthermore, in Flemish higher education institutions barely offer new programs while in the Netherlands this happens frequently. Also, when it comes to internationalization Flanders seems to be less eager than the Netherlands as well. Even though internationalization has been labeled as a 'top priority' by the NVAO and has been acknowledged as important by the Flemish higher education sector as well, in practice there is not happening that much in order to facilitate internationalization in Flanders. This is mostly out of concern for increased burden but could perhaps also be interpreted as being a result of the less innovative context of the Flemish higher education sector in general.

The code 'simplification' has been added along the coding process. The code has not been applied often (4x). The codes refer to the call of Flanders to simplify the accreditation system and thereby reduce the burden. Also, by simplifying the accreditation system more autonomy is expected from the educational institutions and the call for institutional autonomy has been quite loud in Flanders (see code group institutional autonomy).

Finally, privatization was added to the coding list based on the theoretical framework. In practice, privatization did not turn out to be important regarding the divergence of the Dutch and Flemish accreditation systems: it has only been coded once.

5.2 CODE GROUP: INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY

The code group institutional autonomy has been based on the theoretical framework as well. Over time institutional autonomy among European higher education institutions has increased as a result of the changing relationship between states and universities. It is thought that the extent to which this institutional autonomy has shifted from states to universities differs among states. When institutions in either the Netherlands or Flanders hold significantly more autonomy, this could possibly lead to divergence.

5.2.1 AUTONOMY FLEMISH INSTITUTIONS

The code 'Autonomy Flemish institutions' has been coded for 56 times. Over the whole period of analysis, from 2010 to 2017, it was clear that there was a strong desire, or even demand, from Flemish institutions to increase their autonomy. This demand has been acknowledged

by the NVAO via their annual reports and additional reports. Furthermore, this demand could also be seen in various newspapers and in political documentation. The demand of Flemish higher education institutions for increased institutional autonomy grew during the analyzed time period.

‘Autonomy Flemish institutions’ was, by far, coded mostly along with ‘accountability’ (19x). This entails that in most cases, it was mentioned that Flemish institutions (could get) increased autonomy. However, they would be held accountable for their quality. In other words, in exchange for increased autonomy, the Flemish institutions would also carry increased accountability when it comes to their quality and quality assurance. Flemish institutions have gained autonomy over time with the condition that they are accountable as well. As higher education in Flanders is (partially) being funded by the state, and as higher education is seen as important for the welfare of the country, it is required that the institutions are held accountable for their quality – along with their increased autonomy. They must be able to show external evaluators that they reach the minimum quality, that students achieve the learning outcomes and that there is a quality culture in their institution. In sum, increased autonomy for Flemish institutions comes along with responsibility.

‘Autonomy Flemish institutions’ was also coded relatively often together with ‘customization’ (11x). As Flemish institutions obtained more autonomy, they also got more freedom in the accreditation process. They were able to emphasize what they think is important regarding quality, to express their unique context. Thus, increased autonomy enabled Flemish institutions to shape quality and quality assurance in their own way.

‘Quality culture’ has also been coded together with ‘Autonomy Flemish institutions’ relatively often. The relationship between these codes could best be described in the words of the Flemish government’s evaluation of quality assurance and accreditation in higher education²¹: “The institutional reviews clarify that a quality culture has grown within the institutions. This strengthens the idea that institutions are ready to take responsibility regarding quality of higher education and that increasing autonomy and ownership in a system of institutional

²¹ Translated from Dutch: “De instellingsreviews maken duidelijk dat er in de instellingen een kwaliteitscultuur is gegroeid. Dit sterkt het idee dat instellingen klaar zijn om verantwoordelijkheid op te nemen over de onderwijskwaliteit en dat het verlenen van autonomie en eigenaarschap in een stelsel met instellingsreviews een juiste evolutie is”

reviews is the right evolution” (Vlaanderen is onderwijs & vorming, 2017, p. 36). Thus, as Flemish institutions gained more autonomy, they were also enabled to develop their own (autonomous) quality culture.

5.2.2 AUTONOMY DUTCH INSTITUTIONS

The code ‘Autonomy Dutch institutions’ has been applied 39 times, much less than the code ‘Autonomy Flemish institutions’ (56 times). In line with the co-occurrence of the code referring to Flemish institutions, the code referring to Dutch institutions was also most often coded along with ‘accountability’, ‘customization’ and ‘trust’. In the Netherlands, there has been more attention for institutional autonomy in recent years. However, the call for institutional autonomy is, by far, not as loud as in Flanders. The origin in this lies perhaps in the image of higher education in the Netherlands and in the history of institutional autonomy in the Netherlands.

5.2.3 TRUST

The code ‘trust’ has been applied 90 times. Over the whole time period trust seemed to be an important factor in the quality accreditation in higher education in both the Netherlands and Flanders.

In Flanders, ‘trust’ was mostly referred to as a condition, or reason for, increased institutional autonomy. The educational institutions in Flanders have underlined multiple times that they deserve to be trusted (based on proven previous quality) – and thus to get increased autonomy. Moreover, all rectors of the Flemish higher education institutions demanded that an institutional review on its own should be sufficient for quality assurance and that the additional quality assurance measures radiates distrust.

In the Netherlands, ‘trust’ referred most often to thought that it is important that society trusts the quality of higher education and that society trusts the legitimacy of the diplomas awarded by Dutch higher education institutions. Furthermore, in the Netherlands ‘trust’ also referred quite often to the decreased trust in the higher education sector in general as a result of the unveiled shortcomings in Dutch higher education institutions in 2010 and 2011.

‘Trust’ has been coded most often together with ‘accountability’ and ‘quality culture’. The link between ‘trust’ and ‘accountability’ refers mostly to the situation in the Netherlands.

Generally, unveiled shortcomings in Dutch higher education institutions seriously damaged the trust in the quality (assurance) of Dutch higher education. Therefore, more accountability regarding the quality and quality assurance systems was demanded in the Netherlands. The link between 'trust' and 'quality culture' can best be described as follows: "confidence constitutes the foundation on which higher education institutions can expand their own quality cultures" (Unity in Diversity – NVAO Annual Report 2017, 2017, p. 3). Thus, trust forms the basis for a quality culture. By trusting higher education institutions, one gives them the opportunity to develop their own quality culture. There has been an increased focus on the 'quality culture' of institutions. Especially in Flanders, the higher education sector also demanded that they should be trusted more and judged based on their own quality culture.

5.2.4 ACCOUNTABILITY

The code 'accountability' has been applied 67 times. Educational institutions, especially in Flanders, have gained autonomy over the years. In exchange for this increased autonomy, there has been a greater emphasis on the accountability of the institutions coming along with increased autonomy. The basic thought behind this idea is that as institutions get more freedom in organizing their quality (culture), an increased emphasis on accountability comes along. Education is funded to a large extent with public money which requires them to be accountable for the quality of the higher education they provide. Furthermore, as they got more freedom in organizing the process regarding their quality, they also got more responsibility regarding the justification of this process.

The code 'accountability' has been coded along with both 'Autonomy Dutch institutions' and 'Autonomy Flemish institutions'. Remarkably, there was a much higher co-occurrence for the codes 'accountability' and 'Autonomy Flemish institutions' (19x) than for the codes 'accountability' and 'Autonomy Dutch institutions' (8x). This is striking since based on the context one would expect more focus on 'accountability' in the Netherlands than in Flanders. As the higher education institutions in the Netherlands struggled with a damaged image based on unveiled shortcomings in 2010 and 2011, one would expect a greater emphasis on accountability of the quality in these higher education institutions than in Flanders where such shortcomings were not unveiled and thus the trust was not as damaged.

Furthermore, ‘accountability’ has been coded often along with ‘quality culture’ and ‘trust’. As trust is seen as the basis for expanding a quality culture (see p. X), institutions which are trusted get more freedom, or autonomy, to develop their own quality culture. Based on this increased autonomy, there is also an increasing demand for being held accountable for the choices that are made regarding the quality assurance process. Furthermore, increased autonomy implies increased responsibility. For the explanation regarding ‘accountability’ and ‘trust’ see the section ‘trust’.

5.2.5 IMAGE QUALITY HIGHER EDUCATION NETHERLANDS

The code ‘image quality higher education Netherlands’ has been applied for 46 times. By contrast, the code ‘image quality higher education Flanders’ has only been applied for 3 times. This enormous difference can be explained based on the unveiled shortcomings of higher education institutions in the Netherlands in 2010 and 2011. These unveiled shortcomings led to an enormous public and political debate. As a result of these shortcomings and the following public and political debate there have been policy changes regarding quality assurance in Dutch higher education as well as greater concern and distrust regarding Dutch higher education institutions for years. Logically, the code ‘image quality higher education Netherlands’ has most often been coded along with ‘trust’. Furthermore, there were not many co-occurrences regarding the code ‘image quality higher education’ as the situation was mostly described very extensively on itself.

5.2.6 QUALITY CULTURE

The code ‘quality culture’ has been coded for 100 times. Of all codes, ‘quality culture’ has been coded most often. Over the years, one can see a development of increased attention for the concept ‘quality culture’ in both the Netherlands and Flanders. During the last few years, ‘quality culture’ has even been the starting point for new accreditation systems and accreditation frameworks, both in the Netherlands and Flanders. The code ‘quality culture’ has subsequently been coded along with ‘NVAO strategy’. Furthermore, ‘quality culture’ has been coded along with ‘accountability’ (see subtitle Accountability), ‘customization’ (see subtitle Customization), and ‘trust’ (see subtitle Trust).

5.3 CODE GROUP: QUALITY PROCEDURES

The code group quality procedures is based on the theoretical framework section 'quality' and refers to the general quality procedures in the Netherlands and Flanders. Differences between these quality procedures in the beginning or developments of these quality procedures over time could be a potential factor leading towards divergence of the accreditation systems in the Netherlands and Flanders.

5.3.1 REGULATION

The code 'regulation' has been applied for 25 times. 'Regulation' refers to the strictness of legislation regarding quality assurance. In 2013, the accreditation system of the Netherlands and Flanders were in different stages. "The Dutch and Flemish systems mirror their juncture in time" (NVAO, 2013, p. 5). According to NVAO-chair Anne Flierman for each phase one should find the balance between 'regulation' and 'trust'. As both systems are in different phases, in Flanders there is more emphasis on 'trust' whereas in the Netherlands there is more emphasis on 'regulation'. As mentioned before, this can be largely explained by the unveiled shortcomings in Dutch higher education in 2010 and 2011. These unveiled shortcomings led to a large public and political debate. Subsequently, more stringent regulation regarding quality assurance were demanded in order to prevent (unveiled) shortcomings in the future. The code 'regulation' has consequently been coded most often – though still very limited – with the code 'trust'.

5.3.2 PREPOSSESSION

The code 'prepossession' has been coded for 54 times. The code 'prepossession' has been included during the coding process since the apparent prepossession of quality assurance panels was named often. The code 'prepossession' refers to the situation in the Netherlands. After the unveiled shortcomings in Dutch higher education, several measures in order to improve the quality of Dutch higher education as well as the quality assurance process of Dutch higher education were taken. One of the most mentioned measures was the increased focus on the independency, professionalism, and composition of the Dutch quality assurance panels. The Dutch Education Inspectorate noted in 2010 that the independency of the quality assurance panels should be improved. Possibly, the prepossession of quality assurance panels could have been a factor in the late unveiled shortcomings in Dutch higher education. Not

only did the educational institutions fail in providing basic quality, also the quality assurance system failed in not signaling this shortcoming on time.

Not surprisingly, the code 'prepossession' has been coded along with 'quality improvement' most often. This can be explained by the thought that by limiting the prepossession of quality assurance panels, the quality of the quality assurance will be improved. Furthermore, the code 'prepossession' has co-occurred with the codes 'NVAO role' and 'institutional review Netherlands'. The combination of the codes 'prepossession' and 'NVAO role' can be explained by the development that the NVAO, instead of the institutions, will decide on the composition of the quality assurance panels. The combination of the codes 'prepossession' and 'institutional review' can be explained in the sense that the focus on eliminating prepossession of quality assurance panels took place in the institutional review process of the Netherlands. The code 'prepossession' has not been coded together with 'institutional review Flanders' as the prepossession of quality assurance panels was not a point of concern in Flanders.

6 CONCLUSION

Now that the sub questions have been answered in chapters 4 and 5, this chapter gives an overview of the key insights of this research and provides an answer to the central research question. Then, in the discussion section, the findings will be discussed in line with the theory. Finally, in the reflection section, the limitations of this research will be discussed as well as ideas for future research.

6.1 CONCLUSION

Based on the findings as described in chapters 4 and 5, the formulated research question will be answered in this section. The research question which was central in this thesis is: *“which factors explain the apparent divergence in recent years between the Dutch and Flemish quality assurance approaches after the convergence symbolized by the establishment of the NVAO?”* The analysis found several factors which explain the divergence after convergence of the Dutch and Flemish quality assurance approaches.

Firstly, a factor which explains the divergence after convergence is *cultural differences*. Already at the starting situation in 2010, underlying cultural differences between the Dutch and Flemish higher education sector were identified. At the beginning of the timeline, the presumption of cultural differences was based on various different attitudes towards higher education. Different views regarding offering new programs, internationalization and educational reforms illustrated more general cultural differences. Overall, the presumption of cultural differences entails that the Flemish higher education sector is relatively stable whereas the Dutch higher education sector is relatively open to change. Over time, these cultural differences became more visible. These cultural differences are a factor leading towards eventual divergence of the Dutch and Flemish quality assurance approaches as the approaches will develop in different directions when the Flemish higher education sector is relatively stable, and less open to change, and will therefore not be influenced as much by external developments. By contrast, the Dutch higher education sector is relatively open to change, less stable, and will therefore be more sensitive and ‘fluid’ when it comes to external events. Furthermore, the cultural differences are also mirrored in the position of Dutch and Flemish higher education institutions. Historically, Flemish higher education institutions have a more prominent role in the higher education sector than Dutch higher education institutions.

Secondly, a factor which explains the divergence after convergence are *accidental circumstances*. Within the analyzed time period, two accidental circumstances have influenced the development of the Dutch and Flemish quality assurance approaches. First of all, the scandals in Dutch universities of applied sciences in 2010 and 2011. These scandals led to distrust regarding the Dutch higher education sector as well as the Dutch quality assurance approach since the shortcomings were not noticed in time. Furthermore, the unveiled shortcomings also led to increased, more stringent regulation and therefore the quality assurance approach of the Netherlands was becoming more strict. By contrast, in Flanders there were no shortcomings unveiled and thus there was also no necessity to experience distrust regarding the Flemish higher education sector or the Flemish quality assurance approach. Furthermore, there was also no need to add more stringent regulation to the Flemish quality assurance approach, so this approach remained stable. Secondly, the formation of the Flemish cabinet in 2014. The formation of a new cabinet in Flanders in 2014 was a turning point for the Flemish quality assurance system. The main party in the new Flemish cabinet – and the responsible minister of Education Hilde Crevits – stated that trust, deregulation and reduced administrative burden were important pillars to improve the Flemish higher education system. This enabled the Flemish quality assurance system to become less stringent and Flemish higher education institutions gained autonomy based on trust (based on their previous quality assurance results). Thus, by this second accidental circumstance the Flemish quality assurance approach moved even further away from the Dutch quality assurance approach by becoming less stringent, while the Dutch quality assurance approach had just become more stringent as a result of the other accidental circumstances.

Thirdly, the different *balance of regulation and trust* was a factor leading to divergence after convergence. The accreditation systems in Dutch and Flemish higher education consist of a combination of multiple individual components. These individual components range “from quality assurance and quality guarantees to quality improvement and development” (NVAO, 2014, p. 5). The accreditation system, or in other words, the actual combination of these individual components, differ depending on the development stages of the higher education sector. Already at the very beginning of the analyzed time period, in 2010, it was noted that the accreditation systems of the Netherlands and Flanders had not been implemented

parallel. This was due to “a different phase structure in the initial stage” (NVAO, 2011, p. 9) in Flanders. In the NVAO annual report of 2013, NVAO chair Anne Flierman stated that “the Dutch and Flemish systems mirror the juncture of their time” (NVAO, 2014, p. 5). In other words, the accreditation system, thus the actual combination of individual components, is dependent on the phase of development of the higher education sector. For each phase, the balance between trust on the one side, and regulation on the other side differs. As a result of both the cultural differences and the accidental circumstances the Dutch quality assurance system was more focused on regulation while the Flemish quality assurance system was more focused on trust. The different balances of regulation and trust would eventually lead to divergence because the systems would never be in the same phase and because the focus on regulation on the one hand, and trust on the other hand would be incompatible with a convergent development of both systems.

As mentioned before, already at the very beginning the quality assurance systems of the Netherlands and Flanders were implemented nonparallel. Over time, the quality assurance systems could not become parallel as a result of continuing different balances of trust and regulation in the Netherlands and Flanders. These different balances are for a large extent due to the scandals in the Netherlands in 2010 and 2011. As a consequence of these scandals, there was a distrust regarding Dutch higher education institutions. The accreditation system was adjusted and led to a different balance: a stronger focus on regulation (by implementing additional, more stringent regulations) and a much weaker emphasis on distrust. As Dutch higher education institutions were not trusted anymore by Dutch politics and society, the minimum quality guarantee of Dutch higher education had to be guaranteed based on regulations instead of trust and thus gave educational institutions less space. By contrast, in Flanders, the call from higher education institutions for more ‘deserved trust’ and less administrative burden became louder and would (partly) be implemented after a new cabinet was installed. Flemish higher education institutions believed that they ‘earned’ more trust based on previous quality assurance results and that the administrative burden of the quality assurance system did not weigh up against the costs of the accreditation system (namely the administrative burden). Therefore, the balance between trust and regulation shifted in different directions in the two countries. The current experiments with institutional accreditation in the Netherlands may be a change to re-converge with Flanders and so give

NVAO more chances for internal synergy between the Flemish and Dutch directorates in the future.

6.2 DISCUSSION & REFLECTION

In this section, the conclusions, as mentioned in the previous section, will be discussed in terms of the theoretical expectations beforehand. Furthermore the social relevance of the conclusions will be discussed.

In the theoretical framework three theories and concepts were mentioned which could possibly explain the shift from convergence to divergence when it comes to the Dutch and Flemish quality assurance approaches. The theories and concepts discussed were new public management, institutional autonomy and quality procedures. Overall, one could argue that the three theories and concepts in the theoretical framework covered the findings relatively well. During the coding process, some codes have been added within all three code groups which were based on the three theories. However, it was not necessary to add another code group to cover factors leading towards divergence. The codes that were added during the coding process were always logically connected to one of the existing code groups. Therefore, the theories chosen seem to explain the process of divergence relatively well.

Overall, many codes were interconnected. In other words, there were many relationships between the codes. Mostly, codes were interconnected within the code group. However, in some cases codes of different code groups were interconnected. In order to further explore the relationships between codes the co-occurrences of the codes were explored via Atlas.ti. The co-occurrences of the codes could have been further investigated in order to get a better understanding of the relationships between the codes which are leading to the factors that eventually caused a divergent development of both quality assurance systems. Furthermore, the codes could have been connected more explicitly to several time periods to create a clearer overview of the developments of the codes over time. However, a timeline of the development from convergence to divergence was reconstructed in chapter 4.

The most notable finding regarding the factors which caused divergence and the theories discussed beforehand is that the underlying cultural differences were perhaps underexposed in the theoretical framework. Eventually, it turned out that the cultural differences greatly influenced the divergent developments. Even though the divergent developments could

mostly also be explained via other factors, these factors were initially influenced by the underlying cultural differences as well. This could be illustrated by the new public management code group. Codes belonging to the new public management group included cost-benefit and reduced (administrative) burden. When looking more closely at these codes, the cost-benefit critique in Flanders focused on the excessive amount of burden (by carrying out the accreditation process) compared to the actual benefit (receiving accreditation). This critique largely originated from Flemish higher education institutions which stated that they 'earned trust' based on their previous results. Furthermore, Flemish higher education institutions traditionally have a relatively dominant role. Thus, even though the critique regarding cost-benefit could logically be explained from a new public management perspective, the underlying cultural differences also play a role. More generally speaking, in further e.g. anthropological or organization sociology research, the deeper cultural differences could be studied to get a better understanding of its role in convergence to divergence literature.

When it comes to social relevance, this study and its findings could contribute towards convergence-to-divergence debate in general. First of all, at the moment there is much attention for internationalization. As a result of globalization and a more interconnected world, organizations are increasingly cooperating across borders as well. Sometimes, like with the NVAO, new binational or international organizations are established to promote binational or international values or goals through that new organization. However, in some cases the values or goals that were thought to be common across different countries or regions can be seen from different perspectives. Even though cultural differences may seem to be small from a large scale perspective, these can be (too) large in daily practice and eventually lead towards divergence over time. As with the Flanders and the Netherlands, from a (larger) European perspective, the cultural differences may seem to be relatively small. However, when taking a closer look at the development of the NVAO over the years, one can conclude that these 'relatively small' cultural differences were too big to keep the organization functioning in the increasingly converging way it was initially intended. Thus, the findings suggest that the cultural differences – even when they might seem to be small – should not be underestimated when organizations are cooperating in order to promote common values and goals. In this study, the underlying cultural differences were perhaps underexposed in the

theoretical framework. In general, cultural differences between apparent similar countries or regions, such as the Netherlands and Flanders, should not be underestimated during international cooperation. Even though the cultural differences might seem small on a higher level (e.g. from a European level), the cultural differences might in some cases be too large to cooperate on a binational level. Also, even though this study has been carried out in the higher education sector, similar studies could be carried out for other sectors, for example the health care sector.

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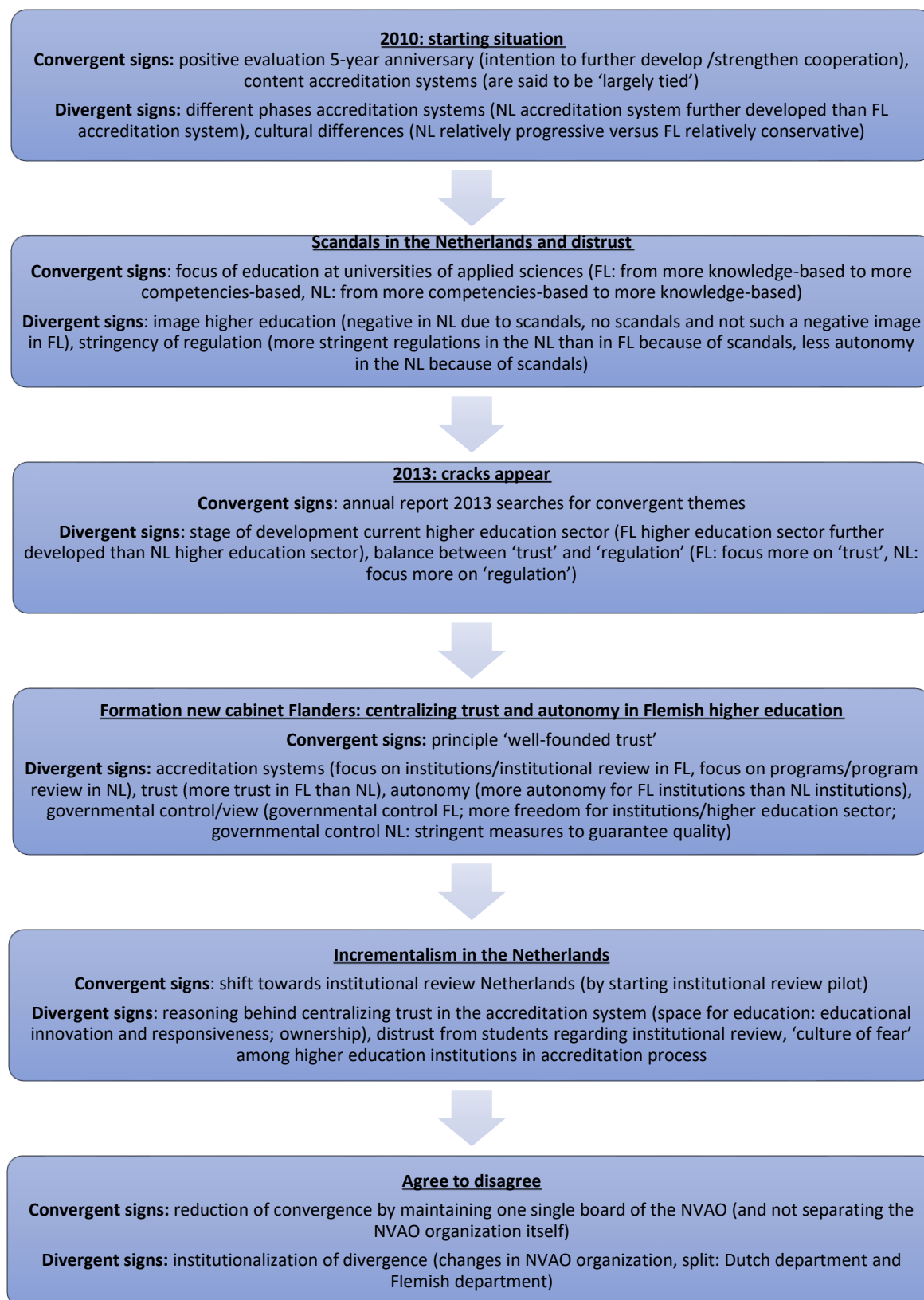
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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A: SUMMARY TIMELINE



APPENDIX B: CODE-OCCURRENCE TABLES

| | Reduced administrative burden |
|--|-------------------------------|
| Reduced burden | 16 |
| Cost-benefit | 7 |
| Trust | 7 |
| Accountability | 4 |
| Customization | 4 |
| Quality improvement | 4 |
| Autonomy Dutch institutions | 3 |
| Efficiency | 3 |
| Image quality higher education Netherlands | 2 |
| Procedure institutional review Netherlands | 2 |
| Regulation | 2 |
| Transparency | 2 |
| Autonomy Flemish institutions | 1 |
| Convergence | 1 |
| Governmental control Flanders | 1 |
| Governmental control Netherlands | 1 |
| NVAO role | 1 |
| Policy making Netherlands | 1 |
| Quality culture | 1 |
| Quantitative versus qualitative indicators | 1 |

| | Reduced burden |
|--|----------------|
| Reduced administrative burden | 16 |
| Trust | 11 |
| Cost-benefit | 9 |
| Procedure institutional review Netherlands | 5 |
| Quality culture | 5 |
| Accountability | 4 |
| NVAO role | 4 |
| Autonomy Dutch institutions | 3 |
| Autonomy Flemish institutions | 3 |
| Customization | 3 |
| Efficiency | 3 |
| NVAO strategy | 3 |
| Quality improvement | 3 |
| Convergence | 2 |
| Governmental control Netherlands | 2 |
| Image quality higher education Netherlands | 2 |
| Regulation | 2 |
| Transparency | 2 |
| External evaluation | 1 |
| Governmental control Flanders | 1 |
| Improvement position Dutch students | 1 |
| Institutional autonomy | 1 |
| Internal quality assurance | 1 |

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|---|---------------|
| Simplification | 1 |
| | Customization |
| Autonomy Dutch institutions | 12 |
| Autonomy Flemish institutions | 11 |
| Quality culture | 11 |
| Quality improvement | 7 |
| Consequences divergence | 4 |
| Convergence | 4 |
| Cost-benefit | 4 |
| Reduced administrative burden | 4 |
| Accountability | 3 |
| Prepossession | 3 |
| Reduced burden | 3 |
| Transparency | 3 |
| Trust | 3 |
| Diplomacy | 2 |
| Divergence | 2 |
| Effectivity | 2 |
| Efficiency | 2 |
| Procedure institutional review Flanders | 2 |
| Regulation | 2 |
| External evaluation | 1 |
| Governmental control Netherlands | 1 |
| Institutional autonomy | 1 |

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|--|--------------|
| | Cost-benefit |
| Reduced burden | 9 |
| Reduced administrative burden | 7 |
| Efficiency | 5 |
| Autonomy Flemish institutions | 4 |
| Customization | 4 |
| Quality improvement | 2 |
| Trust | 2 |
| Accountability | 1 |
| Financial position Flemish institutions | 1 |
| Image quality higher education Netherlands | 1 |
| Internal quality assurance | 1 |
| Procedure institutional review Netherlands | 1 |
| Quality culture | 1 |

| | Autonomy Flemish institutions |
|---|-------------------------------|
| Accountability | 19 |
| Customization | 11 |
| Quality culture | 8 |
| Procedure institutional review Flanders | 5 |
| Quality improvement | 5 |
| Trust | 5 |
| Cost-benefit | 4 |
| Governmental control Flanders | 3 |
| Reduced burden | 3 |
| Autonomy Dutch institutions | 2 |
| Transparency | 2 |
| Convergence | 1 |
| Divergence | 1 |
| Effectivity | 1 |
| Efficiency | 1 |
| External evaluation | 1 |
| Institutional autonomy | 1 |
| NVAO role | 1 |
| Reduced administrative burden | 1 |
| Regulation | 1 |

| | Autonomy Dutch institutions |
|--|-----------------------------|
| Customization | 12 |
| Accountability | 8 |
| Trust | 7 |
| Quality culture | 3 |
| Reduced administrative burden | 3 |
| Reduced burden | 3 |
| Autonomy Flemish institutions | 2 |
| Governmental control Netherlands | 2 |
| Innovation | 2 |
| Regulation | 2 |
| Convergence | 1 |
| Effectivity | 1 |
| Efficiency | 1 |
| External evaluation | 1 |
| Improvement position Dutch students | 1 |
| Institutional autonomy | 1 |
| Prepossession | 1 |
| Procedure institutional review Netherlands | 1 |
| Quality improvement | 1 |
| Transparency | 1 |

| | Trust |
|--|-------|
| Accountability | 15 |
| Quality culture | 12 |
| Reduced burden | 11 |
| Autonomy Dutch institutions | 7 |
| Reduced administrative burden | 7 |
| Image quality higher education Netherlands | 6 |
| Autonomy Flemish institutions | 5 |
| Convergence | 4 |
| Internal quality assurance | 4 |
| Quality improvement | 4 |
| Regulation | 4 |
| Customization | 3 |
| Institutional autonomy | 3 |
| Cost-benefit | 2 |
| Divergence | 2 |
| External evaluation | 2 |
| Innovation | 2 |
| NVAO strategy | 2 |
| Transparency | 2 |
| 2 nd round Netherlands | 1 |
| Governmental control | 1 |
| Governmental control Flanders | 1 |
| Governmental control Netherlands | 1 |
| NVAO role | 1 |
| Policy making Flanders | 1 |
| Procedure institutional review Flanders | 1 |

| | Accountability |
|--|----------------|
| Autonomy Flemish institutions | 19 |
| Trust | 15 |
| Quality culture | 9 |
| Autonomy Dutch institutions | 8 |
| Quality improvement | 7 |
| Reduced administrative burden | 4 |
| Reduced burden | 4 |
| Regulation | 4 |
| Transparency | 4 |
| Customization | 3 |
| External evaluation | 3 |
| Procedure institutional review Flanders | 3 |
| Efficiency | 2 |
| Image quality higher education Netherlands | 2 |
| Institutional autonomy | 2 |
| NVAO strategy | 2 |

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| Prepossession | 2 |
| Cost-benefit | 1 |
| Effectivity | 1 |
| Governmental control Flanders | 1 |
| Improvement position Dutch students | 1 |
| Innovation | 1 |
| Internal quality assurance | 1 |
| Procedure institutional review Netherlands | 1 |

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| | Image quality higher education Netherlands |
| Trust | 6 |
| Governmental control | 4 |
| Accountability | 2 |
| NVAO role | 2 |
| Prepossession | 2 |
| Quality improvement | 2 |
| Reduced administrative burden | 2 |
| Reduced burden | 2 |
| Cost-benefit | 1 |
| NVAO strategy | 1 |
| Regulation | 1 |

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|--|-----------------|
| | Quality culture |
| Trust | 12 |
| Customization | 11 |
| Accountability | 9 |
| Autonomy Flemish institutions | 8 |
| Quality improvement | 7 |
| Internal quality assurance | 5 |
| Procedure institutional review Netherlands | 5 |
| Reduced burden | 5 |
| NVAO strategy | 4 |
| Autonomy Dutch institutions | 3 |
| Convergence | 3 |
| Efficiency | 2 |
| External evaluation | 2 |
| Governmental control Flanders | 2 |
| Governmental control Netherlands | 2 |
| Improvement position Dutch students | 2 |
| Institutional autonomy | 2 |
| NVAO role | 2 |
| Procedure institutional review Flanders | 2 |
| Quantitative versus qualitative indicators | 2 |
| Regulation | 2 |
| 2 nd round Netherlands | 1 |
| Cost-benefit | 1 |
| Divergence | 1 |

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| Effectivity | 1 |
| Governmental control | 1 |
| Innovation | 1 |
| Reduced administrative burden | 1 |
| Results accreditation | 1 |
| Transparency | 1 |

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| | Regulation |
| Accountability | 4 |
| Trust | 4 |
| Autonomy Dutch institutions | 2 |
| Customization | 2 |
| Quality culture | 2 |
| Quality improvement | 2 |
| Reduced administrative burden | 2 |
| Reduced burden | 2 |
| Autonomy Flemish institutions | 1 |
| Effectivity | 1 |
| Governmental control Netherlands | 1 |
| Image quality higher education Netherlands | 1 |
| Improvement position Dutch students | 1 |
| NVAO role | 1 |
| NVAO strategy | 1 |
| Prepossession | 1 |
| Procedure institutional review Netherlands | 1 |

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|--|---------------|
| | Prepossession |
| Accountability | 2 |
| Autonomy Dutch institutions | 1 |
| Customization | 3 |
| Divergence | 1 |
| Efficiency | 1 |
| Governmental control Netherlands | 1 |
| Image quality higher education Netherlands | 2 |
| Innovation | 1 |
| NVAO role | 4 |
| Procedure institutional review Netherlands | 4 |
| Quality improvement | 5 |
| Regulation | 1 |
| Transparency | 1 |

APPENDIX C: COLLECTED DOCUMENTS

| Category | Source | Title | Date |
|--|---|--|------------------|
| Annual reports NVAO | NVAO | Steun en samenwerking – Jaarverslag 2010 | Mei 2011 |
| | | Vinger aan de pols – Jaarverslag 2011 | Juni 2012 |
| | | Nieuwe paden – Jaarverslag 2012 | Juni 2013 |
| | | Focus op ontwikkeling – Jaarverslag 2013 | Juni 2014 |
| | | Een volgende stap – Jaarverslag 2014 | Juni 2015 |
| | | Stelsels in beweging – Jaarverslag 2015 | Juni 2016 |
| | | Nieuwe wegen – Jaarverslag 2016 | Juni 2017 |
| | | Eenheid in verscheidenheid – Jaarverslag 2017 | Juni 2018 |
| Assessment frameworks / kader NVAO | NVAO | Assessment frameworks for the higher education accreditation system | 6 december 2010 |
| | | Beoordelingskaders accreditatiestelsel hoger onderwijs Nederland | 19 december 2014 |
| | | Kader Opleidingsaccreditatie – Vlaanderen 2015-2021 | 20 maart 2015 |
| | | Kader Instellingsreview – Vlaanderen 2015-2017 | 20 maart 2015 |
| | | Kwaliteitscode – Vlaanderen 2015-2017 | 10 juni 2015 |
| | | Beoordelingskader accreditatiestelsel hoger onderwijs Nederland | September 2016 |
| | | Assessment framework for the higher education accreditation system of the Netherlands | September 2016 |
| | | Belangrijke verschillen Beoordelingskaders accreditatiestelsel hoger onderwijs Nederland 2014-2016 | September 2016 |
| External reports and other | Rekenhof en Algemene Rekenkamer | Kwaliteitsbewaking in het hoger onderwijs in Nederland en Vlaanderen | Juli 2008 |
| | Staatssecretaris Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap | Beleidsreactie op het rapport over alternatieve afstudeertrajecten en de bewaking van het eindniveau in het hoger onderwijs; het rapport over alternatieve afstudeertrajecten en de bewaking van het eindniveau bij hogeschool Inholland en het rapport over het onderzoek naar de kwaliteit en het niveau van de alternatieve afstudeertrajecten en | 20 mei 2011 |

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| | | bijbehorende reguliere afstudeertrajecten bij vijf opleidingen van hogeschool Inholland en een reactie op eerder ingediende moties inzake de kosten van HBO | |
| | Staatssecretaris Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap; Raad van State | Wijziging van de Wet op het hoger onderwijs en wetenschappelijk onderzoek en de Wet op het onderwijstoezicht in verband met de versterking van de kwaliteitswaarborgen voor het hoger onderwijs alsmede tot wijziging van de Wet op het hoger onderwijs en wetenschappelijk onderzoek en de Wet educatie en beroepsonderwijs in verband met de introductie van een aanwijzingsbevoegdheid voor de minister (Wet versterking kwaliteitswaarborgen hoger onderwijs) (inclusief advies Raad van State 22 juni 2012 en nader rapport 1 november 2012) | 7 november 2012 |
| | Minister van Buitenlandse Zaken | Protocol tot wijziging van het Verdrag tussen het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden en de Vlaamse Gemeenschap van België inzake de accreditatie van opleidingen binnen het Nederlandse en Vlaamse hoger onderwijs | 5 april 2013 |
| | Rekenhof en Algemene Rekenkamer | Kwaliteitsbewaking in het hoger onderwijs in Nederland en Vlaanderen: vervolgonderzoek 2013 | 12 september 2013 |
| | Minister van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap | Accreditatie op maat | 1 juni 2015 |
| | ENQA | ENQA Agency Review: Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) | 13 September 2017 |
| | NVAO | ENQA Review 2017 Self-Assessment Report | Oktober 2016 |
| | NVAO | ENQA Review 2017 Annexes to the Self-Assessment Report | Oktober 2016 |
| | ENQA | Report of the Panel of the external review of NVAO | September 2012 |
| | NVAO | Self-evaluation report NVAO 2012 | 16 april 2012 |
| | NVAO | Attachments Self-evaluation report NVAO 2012 | 16 april 2012 |

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| | HoGent in opdracht van Minister van Onderwijs, Jeugd, Gelijke Kansen en Brussel | Onderzoek naar planlastvermindering in het hoger onderwijs | 2013 |
| | Onderwijsraad | Kwaliteit in het hoger onderwijs (Nederland) | Augustus 2015 |
| | Vlaams ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming | Decretale evaluatie van het stelsel van kwaliteitszorg en accreditatie in het hoger onderwijs | November 2017 |
| | Inspectie van het Onderwijs | De kwaliteit van het Nederlandse accreditatiestelsel hoger onderwijs | Juni 2018 |
| Newspaper articles | ScienceGuide | Reviews, geen afvinklijsten | 20 november 2013 |
| | | Je voelt hoe mensen erin zitten | 28 november 2013 |
| | | Vlaamse opstand tegen borging | 7 juli 2014 |
| | | Strengte borging moet wél | 8 juli 2014 |
| | | Kwaliteit verdeelt Vlaams HO | 11 juli 2014 |
| | | Vlaamse hefboom | 22 augustus 2014 |
| | | Turbulente kwaliteit | 18 december 2014 |
| | | Doorbreek de kring van wantrouwen | 23 september 2014 |
| | | Doorbraak in Vlaamse borging | 24 oktober 2014 |
| | | Korzelige kwaliteit | 18 januari 2016 |
| | | NVAO onder druk in Vlaanderen | 7 december 2016 |
| | | Nederlands schrikbeeld verliest Leuvense verkiezing | 10 mei 2017 |
| | | NVAO accreditatie blijft kat-en-muisspel | 19 september 2017 |
| | | NVAO gaat toezien op nieuwe kwaliteitsafspraken | 6 april 2018 |
| | | NVAO is trots op nieuwe rol bij kwaliteitsafspraken | 11 april 2018 |
| | | “Huidige kwaliteitsafspraken zijn smaller geworden” | 25 april 2018 |
| | | De VVD wil meer meetbare doelen bij de kwaliteitsafspraken | 21 juni 2018 |
| | | Onderwijsraad: NVAO onvoldoende toegerust voor kwaliteitsafspraken | 4 juli 2018 |
| | NRC Handelsblad | Een strengere keuring, voor beter onderwijs | 31 januari 2014 |
| | | Universiteit niet beter door keuring | 2 juni 2014 |
| | | Schaf de kwaliteitstoets voor hogere opleidingen niet af | 9 december 2014 |
| | | Universiteit zucht onder controles | 29 september 2015 |
| | Nederlands Dagblad | Nog meer bureaucratie door instellingstoets | 2 augustus 2013 |
| | | Vertrouwen en controle | 3 juni 2015 |

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| | | Weg met die instellingstoets | 2 februari 2016 |
| | Trouw | Keuring studies hoger onderwijs te streng | 27 april 2004 |
| | | ISO wil kwaliteitswaakhond voor hoger onderwijs | 23 mei 2007 |
| | | Staatssecretaris wil strengere toets kwaliteit hoger onderwijs | 4 februari 2012 |
| | | Rapporten over kwaliteit hoger onderwijs niet optimaal | 12 september 2013 |
| | | Minder controle op hoger onderwijs | 2 juni 2015 |
| | | 'Te vroeg om hoger onderwijs meer vrijheid te geven' | 3 juni 2015 |
| | De Volkskrant | Hbo-keuring is 'dure poppenkast' | 23 mei 2011 |
| | ANP | 'Zelfbeoordeling hoger onderwijs niet goed' | 2 juni 2015 |
| | De Morgen | Academici smeken onderhandelaars: "Stop de visitaties, nu!" | 7 juli 2014 |
| | | Geen externe inspectie meer: Universiteiten mogen zichzelf controleren | 21 november 2014 |
| | De Tijd | 'Niet de universiteit leeft boven haar stand, maar de overheid' | 22 september 2014 |
| | | Vlaams hoger onderwijs levert kwaliteit | 11 september 2017 |
| | De Standaard | Accreditatie moet transparanter | 11 september 2008 |
| | | Rik Torfs: Universiteiten zijn ondergefinancierd | 2 april 2014 |
| | | Tot 2020 geen visitaties meer Kwaliteitscontrole opschorten levert 2 miljoen euro op | 19 september 2014 |
| | | Hoger onderwijs kan controle van zich afschudden | 24 november 2014 |
| | | Het Vlaams onderwijs is goed, zegt het Vlaams onderwijs | 12 september 2017 |