

VU Amsterdam  
Internal educational quality assurance  
SER peer-review group  
Background

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Student- &  
Onderwijszaken

## Why?

The peer review of self-evaluation reports (SERs) is one of the three internal quality assurance (QA) tools used at VU Amsterdam. The others are the mid-term review (MTR) and the mock inspection. The peer review and MTR are mandatory parts of the QA process; the mock inspection is not, but is highly recommended.

The NVAO accreditation framework requires programmes to complete an SER prior to an independent quality inspection.<sup>1</sup> This document informs the decisions made by the inspection panel and provides a starting point for its discussions during the visit. It describes the programme's strengths and weaknesses, as well as providing the necessary information required by the panel to assess whether it is worthy of accreditation. As such, the SER in fact forms the substantive basis for the inspectors' visit.

Because the quality of the SER is at the heart of a successful inspection, the programme is advised by a peer-review group (PRG) on possible points for improvement before it reaches its final form. This peer-review model, with a group of "co-readers" co-ordinated centrally by OKP (Educational Policy, Quality Assurance and Process Management), is an effort to involve – and learn from – as wide a range of expertise as possible in checking the SER. The aims of PRG assessment of an SER are twofold: on the one hand it improves the final report through feedback from a process of reading, commentary and discussion by fellow educational professionals from other departments and faculties, whilst on the other it supports the programme itself by eliciting sound advice from this variety of external perspectives. The process culminates with a meeting of the PRG to discuss and recommend improvements to the final version of the SER.

This QA tool was first instituted in 2014. In the autumn of 2018 it was revised slightly as a result of an evaluation by the Educational Quality Steering Group (STOK). In the original format, the Director of Studies (author of the SER) was not present at the final discussion; as recommended by the STOK, they are now invited to attend.

## How?

The peer review is undertaken by a group of internal "co-readers", made up of individuals with a variety of relevant educational backgrounds: Directors of Studies, portfolio holders for teaching, Directors of Education, members of the Educational Quality Steering Group (STOK), faculty QA Policy Officers (KIK) and/or central OKP (Educational Policy, Quality Assurance and Process Management) Policy Officers.

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<sup>1</sup> Since the introduction of the 2016 accreditation framework, the self-evaluation has been a "free-form" exercise and so it is possible to agree a format other than the traditional SER. Whatever form it takes, however, the self-evaluation must always refer directly to the standards contained in the framework – for example, by means of explanatory notes. Agreements concerning non-traditional formats should always be made in consultation with OKP.

As the PRG, these individuals each read and assess the SER separately in advance of the meeting at which they jointly formulate their commentary and recommendations. Since the PRG is made up of individuals who do not necessarily have the same expertise as the visiting quality inspection panel, they will inevitably consider the SER from their own perspectives. But all should focus upon its internal logic and consistency, and check that the information it provides is adequate, satisfactory and reliable. The PRG also verifies that the programme description covers the standards from the assessment framework and that performance in them is illustrated using the most specific examples possible. In addition, it checks that findings and assertions in the text are substantiated with sound arguments, supported by data and, where possible, backed up with examples.

It is important that feedback focus upon the *text* of the SER, and not too much upon the underlying substantive choices the programme has made in respect of its curriculum and so on. These, after all, are already set in stone. Comments should be made in as constructive a manner as possible.

The Director of Studies is invited to attend the final meeting of the PRG, even if he or she is not the actual writer of the SER. This is intended to be an inspiring discussion for the Director of Studies, creating and bolstering a positive atmosphere in the run-up to the quality inspection. Following the meeting, the co-ordinating Policy Officer draws up its list of recommendations and makes these available to the Director of Studies and the faculty (specifically, the portfolio holder for teaching and the QA Policy Officer).

## **When?**

Within the internal quality assurance cycle,<sup>2</sup> the SER can be reviewed from one year prior to submission of the application for accreditation (t-12 months). When exactly depends upon the scheduling of the quality inspection visit. In the case of large national programme clusters, the inspection panel sometimes begins its round of visits well before the application is due. As a rule of thumb, the SER is submitted to the panel two months (t-2 months) prior to its inspection. The preceding peer-review process takes a maximum of four weeks, during which time the PRG reads the SER, discusses it at the final meeting and issues its recommendations. This means that the faculty needs to schedule the review so that those recommendations are received no later than three months prior to the inspection visit (t-3 months).

## **Who does what?**

OKP is responsible for the composition and appointment of all PRGs. It ensures that suitable members are recruited. It also assigns a co-ordinating Policy Officer to each SER to form and supervise its PRG, to write up its final recommendations and to invite the relevant Director of Studies to its discussion.

The faculty is responsible for planning the compilation of the SER and for the timely submission of a version for the PRG to review. This should be the final document (or as final as possible).

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<sup>2</sup> For a description of the internal QA system and its specific tools, see the QA cycle diagram.

