

VU Amsterdam
Internal educational quality assurance
Mock inspection visits
Background

Why?

The mock inspection visit is one of the three internal quality assurance (QA) tools used at VU Amsterdam. The others are the mid-term review and peer reviews of self-evaluation reports (SERs). The last two of these are mandatory parts of the QA process, but not the first. Faculties and/or programmes decide for themselves whether to hold mock inspections and whether to seek support from OKP (Educational Policy, Quality Assurance and Process Management). Over the years, OKP has gained a lot of experience in supervising such exercises and so has developed a well-defined format for them.

A mock visit is not an essential, prescribed component of the inspection and accreditation process in the same way that, say, an SER is. Nevertheless, it is very useful in preparing for the real inspection visit. In particular, it draws attention to an important but often overlooked aspect of accreditation: the impression of the programme you as a group put across to the external quality inspection panel. How do you present a realistic, credible and positive image? At this stage, towards the end of preparations for the accreditation procedure, your efforts as a programme have for some time been devoted to gathering information and to writing and discussing the SER. In other words, you have been concentrating upon written information.

By contrast, the *collective verbal transmission of information and explanations* has usually received no attention. This gives rise to a danger that your own familiarity with the contents of the SER, built up steadily over a lengthy period of time, lulls you into false confidence that its text will be just as “alive” for the panel as it is for the writers. The mock inspection visit is an opportunity to practise a joint presentation, to select and test *strong, specific, cases* from your work and to find out what impression you convey – consciously or subconsciously – as delegations representing your programme. Moreover, it *compels* those involved to set aside their day-to-day activities and come together to focus upon the *upcoming inspection visit* and the accreditation procedure.

Full diaries and hard-to-change teaching commitments can make it difficult to find a suitable time for a mock inspection visit. But precisely because of such workload pressure, this exercise serves an additional purpose in that it *forces* people to set aside a morning or afternoon dedicated solely to collective preparations for the actual inspection visit.

How?

As a preparatory exercise, a mock inspection visit can take a number of forms. Below we describe three possible approaches and explain why VU Amsterdam has opted for one in particular, what we call “Dotting the i’s together”.

Dress rehearsal

This approach emulates the actual inspection visit as closely as possible. With exactly the same logistics (for example, delegation briefings and debriefings scheduled precisely as during the real visit), timetable and even catering. Although, of course, the questions put by the panel, the subsequent dialogue and how the day actually unfolds cannot be predicted entirely. The advantage

of this option lies mainly in the fact that it enables people to prepare in advance and familiarize themselves with the course of the day's events.

Dotting the i's together

In the case, the panel discussions are conducted in abridged form in the presence of all involved. The "audience" of observers, made up of those participants not actually being questioned at the time, plays an important role in this format: they watch and listen to the dialogue with the panel, and provide the delegation concerned with feedback afterwards. Everyone thus plays two roles during the session: delegation member and, while the other delegations are being questioned, observer. The advantage of this option is its natural focus upon the collective aspect of the exercise. People also tend to be more receptive to constructive feedback from their own colleagues and students than from the relative outsiders on the panel.

Refining the SER

For this option, in principle either of the above formats can be used. The main difference is that the exercise is held much earlier. In fact, it is really a hybrid activity combining the mock inspection visit with a final round of improvements to the SER. Whilst a full draft version of the SER is required in order to emulate the inspection visit with a panel, in this case it can still be revised if the panel discussions reveal a reason to do so. Due to the long delay between the practice session and the actual inspection, however, this option is perhaps not that useful as a mock visit. Its advantages lie mainly in enhancing the quality of the SER, and hopefully in its practical value in supporting discussion about that document.

Our selection of the "Dotting the i's together" approach (the second option above) is motivated primarily by the relatively extensive benefits it can achieve with relatively little financial and time investment.

Those benefits are as follows.

- The exercise makes it very clear that the accreditation procedure requires group effort – it is not something which can be left the Director of Studies alone or to each delegation separately.
- It shows each delegation the importance of acting as a team.
- Everyone – tutors and students – sees the programme as a whole, and from different perspectives. This can sometimes be a real eye-opener!
- The exercise provides a reasonable guarantee that no avoidable mistakes will be made during the actual inspection visit, even if it cannot totally guarantee that that will be a success.
- It generates momentum to complete all the remaining preparations in the short time left before the actual inspection visit.

Format

During the mock inspection visit, all the delegations due to take part in the actual inspection are interviewed by a panel, as they will be then. The timetable is also based upon that of the real visit, although the rounds of questioning are shorter. After each of these, the delegation concerned receives feedback from the observers and the panel. The key question this seeks to answer is: has the delegation made a good impression? The observers are the members of all the other delegations. This means that everyone due to play a part during the actual inspection is present throughout the mock visit. The session is led by a supervisor from OKP. They steer the feedback rounds, keep an eye on the time and note down those topics requiring further consideration in the run-up to the actual inspection visit.

Panel questioning: 20 minutes per delegation.

Feedback round: approx. 10 minutes per delegation of collective reflection. What stood out? What went well? What not?

Sample timetable

1300-1330 Introduction, instructions and short preparatory period for delegations.

1330-1400 Panel questioning of group A (20 min.) plus follow-up discussion with feedback (10 min.).

1400-1430 Panel questioning of group B (20 min.) plus follow-up discussion with feedback (10 min.).

1430-1500 Panel questioning of group C (20 min.) plus follow-up discussion with feedback (10 min.).

1500-1515 Break

1515-1545 Panel questioning of group D (20 min.) plus follow-up discussion with feedback (10 min.).

1545-1615 Panel questioning of group E (20 min.) plus follow-up discussion with feedback (10 min.).

1615-1630 Final discussion plus conclusions; optional closing reception.

When?

Mock inspections II: Background

In terms of position and role in the internal quality assurance cycle:¹ at the end of the preparatory process for the accreditation procedure, shortly before the actual inspection visit (between one and two weeks in advance). By this time the SERs and selected student graduation work have been submitted to the evaluation agency and the composition of inspection panel and programme delegations are known, as is the timetable for the visit. With this timing, the mock inspection visit provides an opportunity for everyone involved to “dot the i’s” together.

¹ For a description of the internal QA system and its specific tools, see the QA cycle diagram.