

Summary

Introduction

The Education Inspectorate has investigated the safeguards regarding attainment levels for Dutch diplomas issued by NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences (hereinafter: NHL Stenden) to students who followed part of the programme at the institution's Qatari campus. The programmes concerned are International Business and Management Studies (IBMS), Hotel Management (HM) and Tourism Management (TM), as offered by NHL Stenden in Qatar.

Conclusion

The Inspectorate has concluded that there are insufficient safeguards regarding attainment levels for Dutch diplomas issued to students from the Qatari campus.

Background

The investigation was conducted in response to a warning in February 2018 that a number of Qatari students¹ did not comply with the admission requirements and had insufficient command of English, but were nevertheless awarded Dutch diplomas.

The issue under investigation

University education abroad does not, in principle, fall within the scope of the Inspectorate's supervision; the same therefore applies to NHL Stenden's programmes in Qatar. Consequently this investigation is not concerned with the education provided in Qatar, but with the awarding of degrees in the Netherlands. The issue under investigation was:

Are there sufficient safeguards regarding attainment levels for Dutch diplomas issued to students from the Qatar campus?

Our assessment is in the first place based on the Higher Education and Research Act (*Wet op het hoger onderwijs en wetenschappelijk onderzoek* or 'WHW'). We also took into account the letter of 7 June 2012 from the then State Secretary for Education, Culture and Science to higher education institutions (known as OCW 2012b, hereinafter referred to as: 'the policy letter').

Sub-conclusions

In order to answer the main question, we examined five sub-questions. Our sub-conclusions are as follows.

1. The institutional management of NHL Stenden makes no assessment in the Netherlands of whether students from Qatar comply with the admission requirements set by section 7.24, subsection 2. This means that no formal individual exemption from these admission requirements is granted upon enrolment in the Netherlands. Consequently, NHL Stenden does not comply with the obligation laid down by section 7.28, subsection 2 of the WHW. The Inspectorate's file inspection did not find any indications that students have been admitted without a prior education diploma that meets the required standard.
2. The NHL Stenden examination boards/their Dutch members do not take substantiated individual decisions on exemptions for Qatari students who want to obtain a Dutch diploma.ⁱ This applies both for subjects passed in the first and second year in Qatar and study units passed in Qatar at a later stage, such as an internship or dissertation. Consequently, the requirements set by the WHW (section 7.12b, subsection 1d) and the further specification thereof in the policy letter, have not been complied with.
3. The examination board is generally well equipped for its task, but there are insufficient safeguards for its independence in relation to awarding Dutch degrees to students from its campuses abroad. Under the current system, the Dutch examination board members adopt the assessment of the examination board (members) at the Qatari campus. They do not feel that they have the scope to assess the performance of Qatari students on their merits or do not do so in practice. This is contrary to the provision contained in section 7.12a, subsection 2 of the WHW.
4. NHL Stenden does not fulfil the 25% requirement. The Inspectorate interprets the policy letter to mean that at least 60 credits for a 240-credit bachelor programme must be earned from the Dutch programme in the Netherlands. Of the 88 Qatari students who started in Qatar in 2012-2014 and obtained a Dutch diploma, around 10 percent actually earned 60 credits from the Dutch programme in the Netherlands. We also conclude that the requirement that foreign students must at least be enrolled for the Dutch programme during the final part of the programme has not been

complied with. Students come to the Netherlands for the third year of their studies, but not for the graduation phase in the fourth year.

5. In as far as possible the institution has organised the education it offers in accordance with the requirements set for the Dutch programme for which the (Dutch) diploma can be conferred. The policy of 'here is there' is put into practice by harmonising education, testing and procedures wherever possible. However this has not prevented recurring indications of irregularities in Qatar. This prompted the examination board to urgently request the executive board in February 2017 to stop offering the IBMS, HT and TM programmes in Qatar on account of quality issues. Because the Inspectorate has no supervisory authority in Qatar, we have asked the institution to commission an external investigation in response to the indications.

Follow-up supervision

The executive board of NHL Stenden must ensure that legislation and regulations are complied with. This means in any case that:

- NHL Stenden shall assess upon enrolment in the Netherlands whether students comply with the statutory admission requirements. If not, a formal exemption for the entry diploma shall be granted in the Netherlands upon enrolment, provided that the student has an entry diploma that is at least equivalent to that which is required by Dutch law.
- The NHL Stenden examination boards shall take substantiated individual decisions on exemptions for students from its campuses abroad who want to obtain a Dutch diploma, for all study units passed outside the Netherlands.
- In the case of accreditation, the graduation projects of students who have entered via the campuses abroad shall always be submitted for assessment.

The institution must also fulfil the requirements set by the policy letter. This means that all Qatari students without exception must earn 60 credits from the Dutch programme in the Netherlands. This Dutch part of the programme must encompass the graduation phase in order to fulfil the requirement that students are enrolled with the Dutch institution during the final part of the programme.

The Inspectorate has asked the institution to submit an action plan by 1 October 2019 at the latest, describing the action it will take in response to the inspection report's conclusions and recommendations. In November 2019, after receiving this action plan, the Inspectorate will take a decision on follow-up supervision.

Possible follow-up investigation

Because the investigation shows a lack of key safeguards regarding attainment levels for diplomas, the question also arises of whether qualifications may have been wrongly awarded. Before passing judgment on this issue, the Inspectorate wants to know more about the education offered in practice in Qatar. Since the Inspectorate has no power to supervise education in Qatar, we have asked the institution to commission an external investigation into the education provided in Qatar, focussing in particular on the indications of irregularities. In addition the Inspectorate has asked NHL Stenden to investigate any mingling of public and private funds.

At the time of the investigation, an NVAO accreditation process was under way for the Hotel Management programme. The NVAO's findings will be taken into account in the decision on any follow-up investigation regarding the validity of the diplomas issued to Qatari students.

ⁱ 1 'Qatari students' means students who study at or originate from the NHL Stenden campus in Qatar.