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### Responsible QA – committing to impact

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#### Paper proposal form

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*Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.*

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#### Short bio (150 words max):

The Educational Quality Monitoring Unit is responsible for the practical management, process support, monitoring and evaluation of COBRA. In collaboration with the Vice-Rector of Education Policy, the unit coordinates the flow of the COBRA method and gives account to external organisations and partners, such as the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO). First, we offer support to COBRA staff at the faculties. These staff members are responsible for the practical implementation of the quality assurance method at their faculty. Second, we take on a monitoring role, as we formally monitor all processes in COBRA. On three levels of the institution (education programme – faculty – university), we check whether COBRA's basic principles are taken into account. Finally, we give account to external partners concerning the institution's education policy and quality assurance method.

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#### Proposal

**Title:** Implementing a new method for quality assurance: the case of COBRA at KU Leuven. Lessons learned from a trial run.



**Abstract (150 words max):**

After the amendment of the Flemish Codex of Higher Education concerning quality assurance and accreditation in June 2015, the Flemish higher education institutions had the opportunity to design an internal quality assurance method to monitor their education programmes. The University of Leuven (KU Leuven) developed COBRA, a method with cooperation, action and reflection, checks and balances as its basic principles. During academic year 2015-2016, KU Leuven set up a trial run in which 15 faculties participated. The aim of this trial run was to evaluate the new method in a systematic way, drawing on websurveys, focus groups, reports and input from an international panel. This allowed us to identify positive elements and points for improvement. In this paper, we focus on what we learned from this trial run and how this critical self-evaluation resulted in concrete adaptations for the upcoming quality assurance cycle (COBRA 2.0).

**The paper is based on:** ~~research~~ / policy / practice (select one)

**Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? If yes, give details.** (N/A)

**Text of paper (3000 words max):**

## Development of COBRA

### A brief background

In 2015 the quality assurance and accreditation system – based on external visitations – in the higher education institutions (HEI) in Flanders was seriously revised (Vlaams Parlement, 2015). Decisive arguments for this decision were the lack of ownership of educational quality and quality assurance and a feeling of accreditation fatigue (Aerden et al., 2016). This opened the door for rethinking quality assurance in higher education in Flanders. Hence, the Flemish government, in consultation with the Flemish HEI, has decided to launch and test an **institutional review**: a periodical review by an external commission on the quality of the institution's education policy. In the period 2015-2017 all the Flemish HEI were subject to an institutional review in a trial run.

Within the institutional review all HEI had two options: (1) an external review of the quality of the education programmes throughout the regular procedure of programme accreditation or (2) HEI themselves take the responsibility for quality assurance of their education programmes in their own hands and develop an **internal method for quality assurance**, which is also assessed in the institutional review (institutional review+). For institutions that chose the last option (institutional review+), the accreditation periods of the programmes were extended, which allowed HEI to be exempted from programme visitations until 2020. Exceptions to the institutional review+ are new programmes, programmes with European funding (i.e. Erasmus Mundus) and programmes in a recovery process.

The Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (**NVAO**)<sup>1</sup> coordinates the institutional review. NVAO adopts an appreciative approach: the external commission starts from the institution's context, model and basic principles concerning education policy. It is not evaluated whether the chosen model of the institution is good, but whether that model works. NVAO's focus is on strengths, success factors and improvements in the quality assurance method (VLUHR, 2015; NVAO, 2015).

The first round of institutional reviews in the period 2015-2017 was conceived as a transition and development phase in which the **new approach to quality assurance** could be elaborated for the first time. For example, no direct consequences are attached to the final judgments and opinions in the reports of the external

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<sup>1</sup> The NVAO has been established as an independent accreditation institution under an agreement between the Netherlands and Flanders and, as a public binational institution, has been assuring quality in higher education since 2005.



commissions. In addition, after a thorough evaluation of the new system and adjustments to the decree, it would be possible to start a fully consolidated system in which a positive institutional review could lead to an institutional accreditation.

## The creation of COBRA

In this context KU Leuven – together with all the other HEI in Flanders – seized the opportunity to design its own internal method for quality assurance. Taking into account the upcoming institutional review which was planned in autumn 2016, the moment was created to go ahead and experiment with new quality assurance approaches. On May 26 2015, KU Leuven launched its own internal quality assurance method, named **COBRA**. COBRA stands for cooperation, reflection and action, with attention to checks and balances. Realising that reinforcing a quality culture and developing an internal quality assurance method is a long-winded work requiring cautious considerations, KU Leuven decided to set up a trial run of COBRA in academic year 2015-2016.

The aim of the trial run was to **systematically evaluate the theoretical concept and practical implementation** of COBRA. This allowed the university to identify strengths and weaknesses and to assess whether COBRA is sufficiently robust and complies with NVAO's expectations of a robust quality assurance method. Furthermore, the trial run of COBRA was also part of the institutional review.

## COBRA's basic principles

COBRA refers to three key elements:

- **Cooperation.** Ownership of the quality of education programmes is attributed to the primary actors, i.e. students, teachers and staff. They all actively engage (separately and independently) in an open dialogue about educational quality in co-creation with external stakeholders, i.e. alumni, professionals and (international) peers.
- **Reflection and action.** In COBRA, quality assurance is perceived as a continuous process. Within a cyclic framework, several moments to reflect substantially and take actions are generated at all levels of the university: the level of education programme, the faculty and the university.
- **Checks and balances.** Different perspectives at all levels of the university are taken into account. According to the principle of subsidiarity, necessary preconditions for good education are adjusted at the appropriate level. Furthermore, transparent communication and public availability of information about educational quality is of paramount importance.

These principles should enable the university to permanently monitor and improve the quality of its education programmes. COBRA wants to strengthen efforts to enhance educational quality at every faculty and within every education programme, with respect for existing quality assurance practices. This requires openness towards and confidence in discipline-specific quality cultures. Alongside, procedures should be smart and efficient, supporting genuine cooperation, critical reflections and well-considered actions.

Finally, COBRA adopts an **appreciative approach**, which means that the emphasis is on strong aspects and qualities of people and organisations (Ludema, Cooperrider & Barrett, 2001). Consequently, successful processes and positive experiences within the education programmes are the starting point in the discussions among primary actors. In an appreciative approach, problems, issues and worries are recognised as well and they are always dealt with from a constructive perspective. An appreciative attitude induces a shift in how people think; it encourages them to envisage a desired situation and undertake the necessary actions to realise this goal. This method fits with NVAO's current philosophy, which shifted from a compliance-oriented approach to an



appreciative approach, focusing more on strengths and recognising the importance of contextual elements when engaging in quality assurance (Aerden et al., 2016).

## COBRA trial run (2015-2016)

The course of the trial run is visualised in figure 1. In the **preparatory stage**, the Vice-Rector of Educational Policy organised a start-up meeting with every faculty. The goal of these meetings was to present the scenario of the trial run and clarify its implementation, taking into account the specificities of every faculty. Another action in this first stage was preparing student-moderators to guide a meaningful discussion about the quality of their education programme with fellow students. The KU Leuven Student Council was responsible for the recruitment and preparation of the student-moderators. In total, 164 education programmes in 15 faculties participated in the trial run. 915 students and 968 teachers/staff members engaged in one of the 277 COBRA-discussions.

The **executive stage** consists of the actual discussions about educational quality among all relevant stakeholders, processing the reports and the adjustment of preconditions at the appropriate level.

- **COBRA 1** refers to discussions at the level of the **education programme**. Students, teachers and staff engage separately and independently in discussions about the quality of the programme, using a set of five university-wide questions. Together with other material (e.g. quantitative data), the reports of these discussions were used as input for the programme committee (PC)<sup>2</sup>, who organised a critical reflection about the quality of the education programme(s) for which it is responsible. The reports of the PC's include the reflections and good practices, possible actions and adjustment of preconditions towards the level of the faculty (COBRA 2). To ensure transparent communication and inform all participants in COBRA 1 (students, teachers, staff), the reports of the PC's were published on the internal quality assurance portal.
- **COBRA 2** refers to the discussions at the level of the **faculty**. Using the reports of the PC's (and other relevant materials), the Vice-Dean of Education organised a faculty meeting. Critical reflections and possible actions were formulated and compiled in a faculty report, as well as adjustment of preconditions towards the level of the university, more specifically to the Education Council (COBRA 3). The reports of the faculties were also published on the internal quality assurance portal.
- **COBRA 3** refers to discussions at the level of the **university**. First, the Executive Board of the university invited three international experts to reflect and give advice about the COBRA method, based on the information available on the internal quality assurance portal. Next, the Education Council organised a COBRA 3 discussion, based on all faculty reports, an analysis of the KU Leuven Student Council and additional quantitative data. Then, the Executive Board discussed the input of the international experts and the Education Council, assembling a report with recommendations which was presented at the Academic Council on June 28, 2016. Reports of the Education Council, Executive Board and Academic Council were also published on the internal quality assurance portal.

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<sup>2</sup> A programme committee is a council including teachers, staff and student representatives of one or more education programmes. The PC convenes regularly and manages the education programme(s).

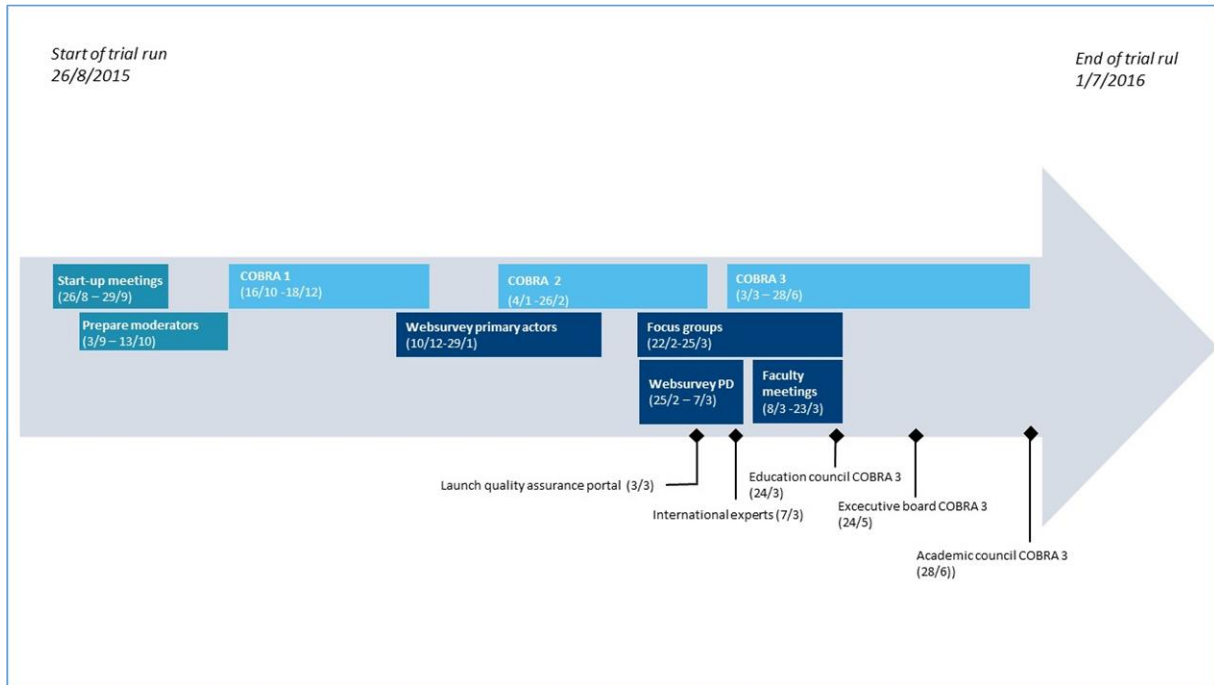


Figure 1: Timeline of the COBRA trial run

## Evaluation of the trial run: methodology

Both **quantitative and qualitative data** were used to evaluate the trial run in a systematic and comprehensive way. Input was collected among all relevant stakeholders at different levels of the university. Two websurveys were administered: (1) a survey for all students, teachers and staff who received an invitation to participate in a COBRA discussion and (2) a survey for all programme directors who were involved in a COBRA discussion at programme level. Additionally, we organised focus groups with students, teachers and staff who moderated one of the COBRA discussions and with faculty staff members who supported the practical organisation of COBRA. Furthermore, comments about COBRA in the reports and the advice from the international experts were taken into account. All this input was analysed and resulted in an overview of positive elements and points of improvement, which will be discussed in detail in the next sections.

## Evaluation of the trial run: outcomes

### Positive elements

Stakeholders appreciated that COBRA encouraged **stronger involvement and active participation** in quality assurance of primary actors (students, teachers, staff). The homogeneous and independent character of the discussions among primary actors was considered valuable, as it stimulated an open and honest dialogue. Other positive aspects were the emphasis on having a meaningful discussion about educational quality and the principles of subsidiarity, reflection and action and transparency.

## Points for improvement

- The relevance of COBRA and the **purpose, meaning and implications of the discussions** required more clarification for some stakeholders. Some actors incorrectly perceived a COBRA report as a formal assessment. Instead, COBRA reports should be considered as a source of information for the PC. Together with other sources or data, the reports could feed the discussion about educational quality at the PC.
- On the more practical side, there was an overall feeling there was **insufficient time** for well-considered reflection and actions. Therefore the cycle of the COBRA process was reconsidered. Concerning the selection of participants and the practical organisation of the COBRA discussions, it was concluded this could be done in a more efficient way.
- It was suggested to **focus more on topics related to the education programme** and the faculty policy about quality assurance in a COBRA discussion, instead of mainly talking about themes covering the whole university.
- The follow-up process of monitoring and feedback needed further refinement. In COBRA, quality assurance is conceptualised as a **dynamic and continuous process** (as a 'film'). However, the trial run learned us we also need to incorporate moments to stop and overlook the current situation (as a 'picture'). In addition, the debate about transparency continued, i.e. which information about the outcomes of the COBRA process should be publicly available on the quality assurance portal.
- Other elements that required attention were enhancing the role of external peers and facilitating the integration of **existing quality assurance practices** at faculties within COBRA and synchronisation with other accreditation frameworks.

# Lessons learned: towards COBRA 2.0

## Purpose and meaning of the COBRA discussions among primary actors

The communication about the aim of the COBRA discussions and why the input of primary actors is valuable has been revised. This resulted in (a) a new online COBRA platform with additional information for faculty staff about the relevance and purpose of COBRA, (b) an adapted invitation for students, teachers and staff and (c) omitting the option to attach self-evaluation labels in the report templates to avoid misperceptions.

## COBRA cycle

Amending the COBRA cycle should give the programme committees, faculties and university more time and energy to follow-up planned initiatives and carry out actions. Instead of a yearly procedure, COBRA now consists of a 2x2 cycle, visualised in figure 2. This new COBRA cycle means that within a cycle of two years COBRA 1, COBRA 2 and COBRA 3 and discussions with students are taking place. The discussions with teachers and staff and the involvement of external stakeholders take place every four years; the discussions with students take place every two years.

## Default COBRA cycle

### Year 1 (2019-2020)

- COBRA discussions among students during the second semester
- Processing the results at PC (COBRA 1)

### Year 2 (2016-2017)

- Follow-up of the outcomes of PC discussion
- Adjustment of preconditions towards faculty and university (COBRA 2 en 3)

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### Year 3 (2017-2018)

- COBRA discussions among teachers and staff during the first semester
- COBRA discussions among students during the second semester

### Year 4 (2018-2019)

- Processing at PC together with external peers, professionals and alumni (COBRA1)
- Adjustment of preconditions towards faculty and university (COBRA 2 en 3)

Figure 2: Default COBRA cycle

## Selection of participants and options for clustering

To facilitate the process of selecting the participants, a simple protocol was developed to assist programme directors in defining relevant criteria for selection. The main purpose is to gather a diverse group of participants, not a strictly representative selection. To mitigate concerns about the practical organisation of the discussions, options for clustering were also introduced. This allows reducing the number of discussions. For example, students in their 2nd or 3rd Bachelor year can be clustered with students from the adjacent Master programme.

## Set of questions

The number of university-wide questions is reduced from five to only one. This way, education programmes and faculties have more ownership of the content of the discussions. In COBRA 2.0, they can add questions themselves that focus on quality assurance themes high on their own agendas.

## Blueprints and education plans

We support all education programmes in developing a blueprint and an education plan. The blueprint is a concise document that briefly explains the goals of the programme and how it is structured in order to attain these goals. A description of the learning outcomes and educational targets are key elements in the blueprint. The education plan helps to envision the future and determine priorities and strategic goals, both short-term and long-term. The education plan operationalises plans and ideas in concrete points of action. The action plans developed during the trial run of COBRA are a source of inspiration for the education plans. Blueprints and



education plans should help all stakeholders to identify the key elements of quality assurance in their education programme and what contributes to a solid quality culture. Furthermore, it facilitates assessing the current situation of the education programme (i.e. ‘taking a picture’).

## Quality assurance portal

The quality assurance portal will have an internal and external section. The COBRA reports of the discussions among primary actors, at the PC, faculty and university level will be published on the internal section, which is only accessible for university staff and students. Currently, we are consulting various stakeholders to decide which information should be available on the external section of the quality assurance portal.

## Challenges COBRA 2.0

The suggested revisions described in the section above (a.k.a. COBRA 2.0) were approved at the Academic Council on June 28, 2016. At this moment, the revised COBRA method is gradually being implemented. The **Educational Quality Monitoring Unit** of KU Leuven aims to support the implementation of COBRA 2.0 at all levels of the university. The team invests in building a strong personal relationship with the key stakeholders in quality assurance of each faculty. This requires constant reconsideration and openness to deal with (unexpected) issues and challenges. Since the launch of COBRA 2.0 two interventions have been organised with the main quality assurance staff members of each faculty. The sessions in these interventions start from an appreciative approach and aim to share positive stories about COBRA and to exchange good practices. It is also an opportunity to gather feedback about the practical implementation of COBRA 2.0 which allows us to further refine the quality assurance method.

The trial run showed us that **attendance of primary actors** at the COBRA discussions was rather low in some faculties. In 2017-2018, we have set up initiatives and projects that will invest in extra efforts to enhance the motivation among students, teachers and staff to engage actively in the COBRA discussions and contribute to a lively quality culture at the faculty. Since COBRA is primarily an inductive method, directly building on the input from primary actors. Therefore, sufficient attendance and engaged participation in the discussions are necessary preconditions for the success of the method.

We learned from the trial run that **input from external stakeholders** (i.e. peers, professionals, alumni) should be reinforced in the COBRA method. An external perspective gives faculties the opportunities to ‘stand back’ and assess the current situation of education programmes on a particular moment in the COBRA cycle (i.e. ‘take a picture’). The Educational Quality Monitoring Unit now wants to support the faculties in designing a format that optimizes the involvement of these external stakeholders. This format should adopt an appreciative approach and stimulate co-creation.

Despite efforts in the trial run to be efficient and omit redundant procedures, the perception that quality assurance is an administrative burden still exists in some faculties. In **reinforcing ownership over quality assurance**, encouraging the exchange of good practices and initiatives to familiarise key stakeholders with the appreciative approach, our goal is to **strengthen positive perceptions** about quality assurance and the COBRA method. The revision of the COBRA cycle should also give faculties more time to implement actions and reduce the feeling that administrative tasks for quality assurance are overwhelming.

We conclude the trial run was very helpful. We could eliminate some obstacles and improve the COBRA method, resulting in COBRA 2.0. Furthermore, the trial run learned us how we can **ensure permanent evaluation** of our internal quality assurance method. This way, quality assurance at KU Leuven will continue to evolve, taking into account internal priorities and contextual elements.





## References:

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## Discussion questions:

- What are, according to you, necessary conditions/success factors for external stakeholders to make a meaningful contribution to quality assurance?
- How do you stimulate involvement/engagement among students and teachers vis-à-vis quality assurance?
- Do you recognise the need to/call for more ownership of quality assurance among teachers and teaching committees in your institution? If so, how do you deal with this?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 24 July 2017 to [QAForum@eua.be](mailto:QAForum@eua.be).  
The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith\_Jones.doc.  
Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.