



# GHENT UNIVERSITY

## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW • ASSESSMENT REPORT

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## 1. Abstract

An institutional review assesses if a higher education institution pursues its educational policy and its conduct for confirming the quality of its study programmes in a qualitative manner. The panel who performed the institutional review is convinced that Ghent University entirely meets these qualifications. Throughout the review, Ghent University has demonstrated that it implements its education policy in a qualitative way and that it displays a concrete quality culture at all levels. According to the panel, the university's education policy aligns neatly with its education vision and works purposefully towards achieving its education objectives. Having established robust provisions for quality assurance, the university is in a position to guarantee the quality of its study programmes through the in-house Quality Conduct system. In sum, the panel's judgement on the institutional review of Ghent University is positive.

The panel arrives at this conclusion based on the informative and well-written Critical Reflection, on the discussions during the exploratory site visit which clarified several of the topics it had earmarked for further attention, and on the wealth of insights it gained during its in-depth review of three research themes: quality conduct and quality culture, external view on programme quality, and multiperspectivism. All these elements are mentioned in the report, which describes the panel's investigative journey that spans four months in the latter half of 2022.

Overlooking the entire investigation, the panel's positive judgement is motivated by the following appraisals:

- Ghent University has a mission, vision and strategy that is shared by the university community and translated in relevant educational objectives and policies. The identity marker of the education vision is the concept of multiperspectivism, which serves as baseline and roof for the other education objectives.
- Ghent University features a research-based approach to education and teaching across all study programmes. It enhances this approach through innovative and 'multiperspectivist' projects involving societal partners locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.
- Ghent University has six long-standing strategic objectives which trickle down in a holistic way in the faculties and the study programmes. The objectives are operationalised, implemented and monitored in a coherent and robust system based on the PDCA-cycle, in which all four Plan – Do – Check – Act components are addressed in equally great detail. The multi-layered quality assurance system encompasses the university, the faculties and the study programmes and is informed by extensive data gathering.
- Ghent University has an extensive and well-functioning system in place to monitor and confirm the quality of its study programmes. A strong element in this Quality Conduct is the number and variety of professors, service staff, students and alumni involved in the Programme Committees, who feel ownership of their programme and are committed to enhance its quality. Moreover, the Quality Conduct system balances control with trust and accountability, also towards the wider public.
- Ghent University thrives on enthusiastic staff members in both teaching and services who feel their efforts are appreciated and rewarded. The university's human resources policy includes principles for promotion that also recognise excellence in education.
- Ghent University in all its layers and through its different stakeholders displays a strong sense of quality culture and commitment to continuous enhancement. The sessions on-

site have shown the panel that there is shared ownership of the system within the institution.

In addition to these positive considerations, the panel also formulated four recommendations, i.e. points of attention that are likely to strengthen the performance of the university in the future. The panel advises Ghent University to make:

- the Quality Conduct system more lean, and thus less cumbersome and time-consuming, in the future;
- more, better and systematic use of external stakeholders, whose role should go beyond informal contacts and ad hoc advise, to monitor and ensure programme quality;
- external peer assessment - including some form of external validation that signs off on the programme quality - an important part of the quality cycle, and apply it systematically in each study programme;
- more explicit, both internally and in its communication to the outside world, what multiperspectivism means, and thus what Ghent University stands for.

The journey of the panel at Ghent University was extensive and at times complicated. At the end of the investigation, the pieces of the institutional review puzzle came together. According to the panel, its deliberations that have led to this positive outcome and are described in the report were facilitated by its host, Ghent University. Hence, the panel wants to thank the university for the high quality materials on paper and online, for the relevant contextualisation during the dialogue sessions of 'how things are done in Ghent and in Flanders', and for the interactive and open exchanges with enthusiastic and committed participants.

## 2. Report of the panel's investigation

### 2.1. Critical reflection

In view of the institutional review that took place in Autumn 2022, Ghent University submitted a Critical Reflection in July. According to the Flemish quality assurance system, a Critical Reflection essentially answers the question how the institution assures the quality of its education within the relevant social and international context and how it involves its stakeholders and external peers and experts. Entitled “Critical Reflection on Ghent University’s Education Policy”, the document – according to the introductory text – aims to give insight in the vision of the university on education, as well as in its education policy and its organisation structure. Furthermore, the Critical Reflection explains how the university implements, reviews and adjusts its education policy, describes how the system of Quality Conduct guarantees the quality of its study programmes, and sets out to prove that a quality culture is present at all policy levels of the university.

Over summer, the panel read the Critical Reflection, which was organised in three chapters and an illustration. The chapter “About Ghent University” positions the university in the Flemish and international education landscape and outlines the structures and processes of the university’s education policy. It also describes three preconditions that impact on the education policy context: human resource management, the financing model for education funding, and the university’s Business Intelligence System. The second chapter sketches the education vision and policy, the translation of the university’s strategic objectives into operational ones, and the review and improvement processes. In the third chapter the focus is on Quality Assurance, and in particular on the past, current and future developments in the university-wide internal quality assurance system, Quality Conduct. Each chapter is completed by a set of related strengths and weaknesses. The Critical Reflection concludes with an illustration of how the university shapes and implements its education policy and quality culture. Throughout the document many web links refer to additional information.

On 29 August 2022, the panel held an online introductory meeting to get acquainted with each other and with the framework of the institutional review. At this occasion, the quality assurance team of Ghent University joined part of the meeting to present the Critical Reflection and outline the key features of its quality assurance process. After the meeting the panel felt well-prepared to start its investigation journey, i.e. to assess whether Ghent University pursues its educational policy in a qualitative manner, including the conduct for confirming the quality of its programmes.

### 2.2. First appraisal

In the run-up to its online preparatory meeting in September 2022, the panel members reported on their initial impressions of the Critical Reflection. These first appraisals were collected by the panel secretary and processed in a compilation document. The individual contributions showed a considerable degree of agreement among the panel members on both the strong points of the university and the issues that required further exploration.

A first element of shared appreciation concerned the **quality of the documentation**. According to the panel, the Critical Reflection is a readable and transparent document, well-structured, with a good logical progression and written in a clear language. The Critical Reflection provides a comprehensive picture of the educational policy and the system of internal quality control of the educational programmes and processes. The panel also found that this concern for accuracy, clarity, and exhaustiveness in the Critical Reflection is reflected

in the education policy of the university. In this respect, the panel noticed that the same qualities apply to the information available through the web links on the internet / intranet site of the university.

Another common observation on the documentation was that Ghent University not only provides information in a manageable manner, but also does it with a high degree of critical self-reflection and openness. The panel appreciated the level of self-awareness in explicitly describing and detailing its strengths and weaknesses. These sections were self-critical and opened the view on a number of important and relevant challenges for the quality assurance system. In sum, the panel found that the quality of the document in terms of self-awareness and openness to point out weaknesses was a good indicator of the attention paid by the university to the institutional review exercise itself.

In addition to the quality of documentation, the panel members reported in their first appraisal on several issues that had been addressed in the Critical Reflection. In order to facilitate the internal discussion, the findings were clustered in the compilation document around eight topics: (i) mission and vision, (ii) quality assurance, (iii) nexus education-research, (iv) staff policy, (v) realisation of education objectives, (vi) involvement of external stakeholders, (vii) Quality Conduct, and (viii) workload. These topics, then, served as a basis for discussion during the preparatory meeting and helped the panel in identifying the key items for the exploratory site visit.

### 2.3. Preparatory panel meeting

The online meeting on 22 September 2022 consisted of three rounds of information exchange: an initial indication by each panel member of their key overall findings; a group discussion on each of the cluster topics; and a final identification of those issues that should certainly be addressed during the exploratory site visit.

The first part mainly addressed the above-mentioned appreciation for the quality of the Critical Reflection and its underlying materials. Panel members confirmed their thoughts on the Critical Reflection and the way the document reflected positively on their perception of the quality of the education policy and of the systematic approach the university adopts in its quality assurance system. According to the panel, the Critical Reflection shows that Ghent University has a good idea about what it does and where it stands in the development process. The description seems to point to a high degree of maturity of both policies and systems. The university also shows self-confidence and self-awareness by pointing in a very transparent way to both strengths and weaknesses. It goes to the credit of the university that, at this stage of the investigation, the panel agreed to the strengths and weaknesses and did not identify other challenges than those mentioned in the respective sections.

In the second part of the preparatory meeting, the panel discussed systematically the eight clusters of topics that had been identified when compiling the appraisals of the respective panel members. While each cluster came with both positive findings and questions for clarification, the panel agreed that four topics were largely on the 'strengths' side as panel members had reported more positive statements than issues for critical exploration.

Hence, the panel confirmed during the preparatory meeting that the **mission and vision** of the university had been clearly transmitted in the education policy and – for the purpose of the institutional review – in the Critical Reflection. The vision and mission were outspoken in the university for many years and have been adjusted along the way. While the university's



mission and vision are undoubtedly well-known among staff, the panel will use the exploratory visit to establish if and to what degree mission, vision and education vision are broadly carried and are processed in the university, its faculties, departments and services. Moreover, the panel was satisfied to read in the Critical Reflection that the university subscribes to basic values as well as broader responsibilities and commitments of the *Magna Charta Universitatum 2020*, as this underlines both the integrity of the university and its involvement in a broader setting. Furthermore, the materials showed nicely how Ghent University is working towards the essential conditions of assuring the quality of its education policy and how its vision on education, which is the cornerstone of its education policy, is connected and translated.

The panel noticed that the education policy is clearly structured and organized in three levels, programme - faculty - university, with responsible organs and persons at each stage, and with a flow of information and decision going both sides in an apparently smooth manner. As a point for further clarification, the panel noted that the Critical Reflection only paid limited attention to the context in which the university operates and to the societal and environmental challenges it is confronted with. Within the Flemish quality assurance system it is important to take the context and the profile of the institution as a starting point; while the profile is covered adequately, more information on the local, regional and societal context of Ghent University would be useful. Similarly, the panel was somewhat surprised by the limited information in the materials on internationalisation of the university – it was mentioned as part of the education policy in a section of the first chapter at the same level as research and education – and by the scant attention to life in and beyond university during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another topic that received wide acclaim among the panel members was the way the university's system for **policy implementation, monitoring and improvement** had been described in the Critical Reflection. The university uses the Plan Do Check Act cycle (PDCA) to structure its quality assurance and adequate tools have been developed to support the process. The six strategic objectives of the university are translated into a uniform set of operational objectives for all faculties and all study programmes. For each of the eleven chapters in the Education monitor the faculties and programmes are expected to determine and document their vision and policy (Plan), the actions they undertake to operationalise this policy (Do), to what extent they achieve the objectives (Check), and which improvement actions are necessary (Act). The information gathered through the PDCA-cycle is compiled in an online platform in a SharePoint environment, the Education Monitor. There is one institutional monitor at university level with 44 operational objectives, eleven faculty monitors with 28 operational objectives, and 103 study programme monitors with 39 objectives. These objectives have been developed involving all three central, faculty and programme levels. The panel had the impression that the described system is very thorough. It is a trust-based and appreciative approach that gives a lot of agency to the programme committees. The system is data-driven in order to ensure evidence-based policy choices, and it is very systematic featuring procedures, monitors, regular evaluations etc. Moreover, the panel found that the PDCA-cycle is well thought out, with a clear division between the more static Plan and Do parts and the more dynamic Check and Act parts, and with good attention that the latter parts are effectively closing the loop. The Plan-Do part encompasses the education policy plans and the various operational objectives that must be assessed (Check), which in turn can lead to improvement actions (Act). Every year, faculties and programmes reflect on the extent to which their education plans concur with the operational objectives. In this exercise they are supported through indicators that are generated automatically by the

Ghent University Business Intelligence System UGI. In sum, the panel's overall impression is that Ghent University has developed a solid system for monitoring education policy and quality assurance with a proper balance between trust and control. Notwithstanding these positive impressions, the panel will explore further to what extent this system is feasible for its users at different levels: is the number of operational objectives adequate, how do Faculties cope with the system, how intensive is it for programme committees to collect the required data, do students and staff have enough competences to deal with the data, and to what extent does the system allow for disseminating and upscaling good practices beyond the individual programmes and faculties?

Two more topics in the Critical Reflection struck the panel as fundamentally positive with a clear potential for development in the future. In terms of the **nexus education-research**, the panel noticed that Ghent University is a research intensive institution with excellent prerequisites for a strong connection between education and research. The academic staff finds it very important that they can provide research-based education and bring (their own) research to the classroom. According to the Critical Reflection, there is room for more explicit links between the education on offer and the research performed. During the exploratory visit, the panel intends to link this topic to the issue of funding and its impact on the quality of research-based education.

Similarly, the panel wanted to know more about **staff policy** following references in the Critical Reflection. The university seems to pay much attention to professionalisation and career planning. In its appraisal, the panel described the new career model and promotion policy for the professorial staff as very interesting and promising. The panel agreed to use the exploratory visit to get more details about the implementation of the staff policy and the possible link between teaching merits and career progression.

The preparatory meeting also confirmed that four other issues require particular attention as panel members had reported on these topics in terms of perceived challenges and/or requiring additional information. While the university's fundamental concept of multiperspectivism and the six related strategic education objectives are described in good detail, and while the information on the achievement of education objectives is described in 2.6.1 of the Critical Reflection, the panel struggled to aggregate information for each strategic objective, at the institutional or faculty level. The panel gathered from the materials that it proved difficult to meet some of these objectives, even to the extent that the panel wondered why the challenges related to realising these objectives were not tackled more thoroughly by the university, such as e.g. the internationalisation of curricula. Hence, the panel intends to obtain further clarification on the issue during the exploratory visit, in order to understand how the university can guarantee the – possibly differentiated – implementation of these six objectives in a complex organisation featuring eleven faculties. In so far as the concept of multiperspectivism is concerned, the panel would like to find out how the organisational structure of the university is helpful in stimulating interdisciplinarity in education and research. Finally, the panel will inquire about the position of the Faculties – and in particular the Deans – in the overall system at Ghent University. This question is not uniquely related to the realisation of education objectives, but also concerns the (education) policy, the overall quality assurance system and the set-up of Quality Conduct.

Another topic that featured prominently in the panellists' appraisals was the **involvement of external stakeholders**. While the university seems to promote the involvement of external stakeholders, it was not clear from the materials whether this attention/policy is really that

strong. Also, the panel did not always grasp how the concepts of international involvement and stakeholder involvement – which constitute two of the university’s six strategic education objectives – were understood and tackled as different issues requiring specific approaches and tools. The involvement of external stakeholders also requires further attention in so far as the external view in the Quality Conduct system is concerned. The panel established from the materials that the internal quality control system looks quite solid, but that the external view within this system is organized in a less systematic manner. Based on the available materials, it was not clear for the panel how the involvement of (different types of) external stakeholders in the Quality Conduct system would contribute to programme benchmarking, evaluation and/or validation. Hence, the panel wants to find out to what extent the external perspective is included in a systematic – and traceable – way in the current Quality Conduct 2.0.

The panel noticed that the Critical Reflection also raised the issue of **workload**. According to the panel, this indicates an awareness of the difficulties many teaching and administrative staff members meet. In the materials, workload is also linked to the availability of sufficient funding, and to the fact that an increase in student numbers is not followed by a similar increase in education funding (and staff recruitment). Hence, the panel would like to find out how this funding system affects the workload of staff. Moreover, the exploratory visit could shed more light on how the prioritisation of the funding inside the different faculties, departments and study programmes might impact on the workload situation of staff. This is all the more important according to the panel in view of the high administrative burden on the current quality control system. Implementing an education policy and a quality culture at the three levels of university, faculty and degree programme requires considerable resources in – and commitment from – administrative staff in support services.

Finally, the panel will use the exploratory visit to obtain additional information on the past, current and future developments of the internal quality assurance system, **Quality Conduct**. It gathered from the materials that the initial system (Quality Conduct 1.0) and its key objectives have changed over time and that new developments (Quality Conduct 3.0) are foreseen in the near future. The extensive description of the current system (Quality Conduct 2.0) in the Illustration section of the Critical Reflection indicates that internal quality assurance is taken seriously at Ghent University. At the same time, however, the Illustration shows that there is still a big margin for improvement. Currently, the system looks quite formalistic, procedural and control-driven. According to the panel, the continuous improvement model must allow for the objectives to be refined and refocused with sufficient frequency. During the visit, the panel will ask for information on the appreciative and coaching approach, which is the new philosophy of the system, and wants to find out how the monitoring results are translated/transposed in a decision by the Education Quality Board.

At the end of the preparatory meeting, the panel discussed the programme of the exploratory site visit. It was agreed that all the topics it had earmarked for further clarification and investigation will be addressed in one of the three interview sessions. These sessions are organised along the three chapters of the Critical Reflection. The panel also counted on double-checking some of their initial findings during a dedicated session with students. Finally, the Illustration session featuring poster presentations on eleven actions was likely to provide in-depth information and clarification on several specific topics the panel had identified as particularly relevant for its investigation.

#### 2.4. Exploratory site visit

The exploratory site visit took place on 11 October 2022. On the eve of the visit, the panel gathered in person to finetune the questions and allocate the topics for discussion among the panel members. Moreover, the panel agreed on an individual and personalised schedule for the open poster session in order to ensure that each topic would receive sufficient attention by as many panellists as possible. During the preparatory meeting and the site visit, the panel was joined by an observer from the Luxembourg Ministry of Higher Education and Research.

In the morning of 11 October, the panel was welcomed at the *Boekentoren*, the most famous landmark building of Ghent University. The visit started with a “Meet and Greet”: after being welcomed by the university, the panel members shortly presented themselves and mingled informally with the hosts and the participants of the forthcoming sessions.

The rest of the morning consisted of three sessions, each covering the topics presented in one chapter of the Critical Reflection. During these sessions, the committee raised the topics it had identified in its first appraisal and searched for clarification on those issues it had earmarked during its preparatory meeting. The panel noticed that the university had paid careful attention to the complementarity of participants in these sessions. Each discussion round featured representatives from university, faculty and programme management, as well as from the administration and education services; moreover, at least two student representatives attended each session.

The first session, **About Ghent University**, included the Rector as main interlocutor on behalf of the University. The panel addressed several topics and obtained extensive clarification on the *position of the Faculties and the Deans* in the organisational set-up of the university. The faculty plays an important role as an entity that has its own position and responsibilities, and at the same time reaches out to the central university level and to the departments and degree programmes. Each faculty is governed by a team, which is led by the Dean and meets every two weeks. Moreover, there are monthly meetings with the Directors of studies, with the university management and fellow faculties. Similarly, the panel got confirmation of the importance the university attaches to *research-based education*. Several participants, including student representatives, underlined that professors are passionate about what they teach and make the link between (their) research and the education they provide in class. In this regard, teaching staff ‘lead by example’: students indicated to the panel that they feel they are trained as researchers. With regard to *human resources*, the Rector emphasised that the new staff policy pays more attention to the quality of education. Compared to previous schemes, it is now possible for staff to get promoted if they focus on education in combination with research. Staff with a poor education track record should not get promotion. The panel understood from the discussions that these provisions constitute a clear breach with what was customary in previous HR promotion policies. Finally, the panel was informed that the university is embedded in the *local society* through a range of projects that serve the poorer areas in the city of Ghent and by introducing community service learning in several study programmes. By doing so, the university promotes the idea that students should become scientist professionals, who are scientifically trained but also firmly anchored as practitioners in (grassroots) society.

In the second session, the panel discussed the **education vision, education policy and quality culture** with the university representatives and the Director of Education. Topics addressed included multiperspectivism, implementation and realisation of the education objectives, quality assurance and the PDCA-cycle. The Director of Education explained that the six

strategic *education objectives* had just been formulated at the time of the previous institutional review. While the six objectives are still valid today, the way they are implemented, monitored and realised has changed over time, and are likely to undergo further adjustment in the near future. In fact, the university decided at the start to have many indicators and processes to monitor progress and delivery of the objectives, and to downsize these indicators over time. A further reduction of the number of indicators is under discussion. Faculty representatives emphasised that the objectives provide a common ground across the university. The education objectives are broad enough in order for each faculty to interpret these in view of their own specificity. While each faculty addresses – and implements – all six objectives, there are differences across the faculties and over time: since the start in 2015-2016, one faculty for instance has had two strategic goals in the mirror per year, while another faculty is focusing on one theme per year. The strength of the education objectives and the *quality assurance system*, according to the participants, lays in the fact that it is the result of co-creation, involving top-down and bottom-up initiatives, whereby in the end everybody knows what the common goals are for each of the six educational objectives, and what these objectives mean for the university and each of the different faculties and programmes. This clarity about the structure also contributes to the *quality culture* within the university and across management, staff and students. Furthermore, several participants indicated how they experience *multiperspectivism* and the university's ambition to train students who "dare to think". The key element, according to both teaching staff and students, is that when confronted with a problem, one looks at different perspectives and contemplates different approaches before forming one's own opinion and taking a decision. This principle is part and parcel of every course and students are trained right from the start in making up their minds – daring to think – after having considered different perspectives. Student representatives also follow this principle when they participate in policy-making boards and committees: taking into account different approaches and viewpoints, they eventually take decisions on what is most important for students and the university. Finally, the panel asked how Ghent University encourages *interdisciplinarity*. Participants agreed that for a very long time there was hardly any attention to interdisciplinary and that until today, the structure of the university does not constitute a natural ground for interdisciplinary. Very often the enthusiasm of individual staff members to develop interdisciplinary initiatives, e.g. setting up minor programmes, has been curbed by many practical challenges. However, there are more and more informal contacts now, as well as interdisciplinary research among colleagues, which eventually lead to concrete initiatives and interdisciplinary actions in education. The panel learned that the new allocation model of staff and money between faculties, which is less competitive than before, will certainly boost the opportunity for interdisciplinary action.

The third session focused on the internal quality assurance system, **Quality Conduct 2.0**, with the vice-Rector – who is also the chair of the Education Quality Board – as key representative of the university. In view of this session, the panel had prepared a list with several questions covering different aspects of the past, current and future internal quality assurance system. The participants explained in good detail how the *Quality Conduct system* has evolved from a more control-based system requiring a lot of administration and sometimes leading to programmes "window-dressing" their performance towards university management. Over the years, however, the underlying data to measure performance are more automatically generated, which leaves time for programme representatives to reflect on their performance and identify in an atmosphere of trust those components that require further attention. According to the Vice-Rector, about 90% of the programmes are doing well for the moment, hence it is possible to diminish the level of control and move to a higher level of trust. In so

far as the *external view* is concerned, the participants indicated that they were developing a system to embed the external and also international perspective into the Quality Conduct system when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Now, these initiatives are being taken up again. Every programme is expected to get input from international peers, work field representatives and alumni, and their input should become part of the content-related contributions to the Education Monitor. Moreover, the Education Quality Board will look carefully at how the programmes intend to take on board the external view in their respective continuous improvement actions. In addition to internal quality assurance, several participants indicated that individual faculties and programmes also look for *external validation* through international accreditation bodies such as AACSB (business), ICAPA (public administration) or CTI (engineering). Moreover, the members in the recently created European University Network ENLIGHT are likely to play a role as critical friends to the university and the respective programmes.

In the afternoon, the Ghent University Student Union invited the panel in student house 'Therminal', which is home to the student activities office. During this **students' moment**, the panel could see – and discuss – the results of a survey among students on what they saw as strengths and points for attention of the university in a range of domains that were in the remit of the Student Union. These informal talks of panel members and student representatives provided many interesting insights in (how students perceive) their position at the university. Overall, the panel noticed from the survey results and the discussions that students appreciate the quality of education and support the (mission, vision and strategy of the) university. Moreover, the panel was impressed by the professionalism of the student representatives and by the way students are involved in all formal and informal bodies and committees within the university, not in the least in the Faculty Councils and the Programme Committees. Exchanging impressions with each other on this student session, the panel noted two concerns: one, the survey results and discussions seem to indicate that students experience quite some stress during their study period: this is caused by the study workload and the fact that an increasing number of students need to combine their study with a (student) job to make ends meet. Secondly, the panel noticed that student representatives find it increasingly difficult to ensure continuation in representation; the participation rate in student elections is limited and often there are more positions than candidates.

After this meeting, the panel walked to the University Forum (UFO) for the **open poster session** where, at various exhibition stands, the panellists could talk to representatives from the programme, faculty and central level about actions they are undertaking to meet the operational objectives. In view of the available time, the number of stands and the number of panellists, it was agreed that each panellist would visit at least four stands. Moreover, all participants were advised to make the individual sessions as interactive as possible, leaving sufficient room for questions. Hence, the panellists acquired a lot of information in 75 minutes on topics relating to the education vision and policy (learning outcomes & study programme design, assessment and feedback), permanent quality assurance (education monitor, embedding the external perspective), and strategic objectives (education based on excellent research, talent development, stakeholder participation, internationalisation). The panel thought the sessions were highly informative and several panellists indicated that they could have stayed longer on this 'information market'. Feeding back individual impressions to the entire panel afterwards, it turned out that altogether the panel had learned a lot, thanks to the well-prepared posters and the truly interactive character of the sessions. Overlooking the information, the panel concluded that many of its initial questions had – at least partly – been answered by the university representatives at the different stands.

At the end of the poster session, a representative of the quality assurance office briefly presented the *Education Monitor* online. The panel appreciated this ad hoc initiative as it provided a hands-on insight on what information is available and how this crucial tool – the backbone of the internal quality assurance system – is used by the central, faculty and programme level.

The last part of the exploratory site visit took place again at the *Boekentoren*. The panel used the first part of its **internal deliberation** to exchange the above-mentioned impressions and findings from the two afternoon sessions with the students and the poster presentations. Then, the panel reviewed the outcomes of the morning sessions and combined the information it had gathered during this exploratory visit with the topics it had earmarked for consideration in its first appraisal and preparatory meeting. This review showed that all topics had been addressed during the day and that several of the panel's initial questions had received ample clarification. Notwithstanding the relevance of the discussions during the morning sessions, the panel felt that it had not managed to get 'under the skin' of the university until the highly informative and interactive exchange during the poster sessions. Hence, the panel will inform the university that it hopes to experience a similar flow of information during the in-depth site visit.

At the end of this session, the panel prepared the dialogue with the university management, identifying those topics it would like to investigate during the second visit in December. Three topics stood out clearly, according to the panel: the Quality Conduct system at programme level, the view (on the role) of external stakeholders, and the strategic education objective of multiperspectivism. In order to formulate the research questions in the most effective way, the panel checked the section on the assessment ground in the assessment framework for the institutional review. By doing so, the panel ensured that its research questions reflected the scope of the assessment and eventually allowed to answer the four coherent questions that together substantiate the outcome of the institutional review:

- Is the educational policy in line with the educational vision of the institution and the societal challenges it is facing within its own context?
- Does the institution ensure the effectiveness of its educational policy; in other words, how does the institution work towards the set goals?
- Within this policy, is the quality of each accredited programme confirmed in an internationally accepted manner?
- Does the institution demonstrate a quality culture at all levels?

In the **dialogue with the institution**, the panel presented its plans for the in-depth visit and checked with the university whether these questions seemed relevant and feasible. A first topic aims to answer the question: *How does quality assurance work in the Quality Conduct system at programme level?* The panel wants to investigate this through three programmes that have already gone through Quality Conduct 2.0: two programmes with a positive quality assurance resolution from the Education Quality Board, and one of the seven programmes that are now in a coaching trajectory. According to Ghent University, this question is a logical choice also in view of the written information, the poster session, and the discussions in the morning.

A second question concerns the view of (the role of) external stakeholders: *How is the university engaged with the professional field, alumni and international peers, and how does*

*this contribute to the further development of a programme?* The panel wants to investigate this via three programmes – one with an obvious connection to the professional field and one where this is less clear. Following the interesting poster session on this topic, the panel would like to meet with employers, alumni and international peers. The university representatives indicated that they had expected this question. Based on the new Quality Code in the Flemish assessment framework, there is now more attention to the external view in the NVAO regulations. The university is addressing the external view at three levels but is still in the process of implementing this approach across all faculties and programmes. At central level a support system is set up to facilitate the ongoing work that is at different levels of integration in the faculties and programmes.

The third investigation track is about multiperspectivism at central, faculty and programme level: *How does the centrally formulated strategic education objective Think Broadly find its way to the faculties and trickles further down to the programmes?* The panel wants to investigate how multiperspectivism is cascading and implemented, and how the university checks that/how this is done. When operationalising this research question for the second visit, the panel invites the university to connect the strategic objective also to the societal context and the challenges this and other universities are meeting. According to the university management, this is a relevant question which requires some further thought on how to present it. The first thoughts are to connect the topic to the university's future plans regarding futureproof curricula, generic competences, interdisciplinarity and the ENLIGHT network.

At the end of this session, the panel and the university agreed that the panel would finalise its research questions and then fine-tune the operationalisation of the questions and the organisation of the in-depth site visit with the university. In the meantime, the university would identify a sufficiently big number of programmes for the panel to choose from and that could serve as case studies for the trails on Quality Conduct and the external perspective. To ensure as broad a representation as possible, the university will seek for a balance among the programmes it is proposing across both questions. Moreover, it was agreed that once the panel had fine-tuned its research questions, the university could think of a format for presentation. According to the panel, it is important that there is plenty of room for discussion, possibly with (very) short presentations at the start of each session. An interactive format such as the poster session where panel and university representatives have a real dialogue would be appreciated.

## 2.5. Research questions

After the exploratory site visit, the panel operationalised the research questions and engaged with the university in a dialogue to organise the trails in the most effective way. The research questions were chosen – and formulated – in such a way that the panel will be able to answer the above-mentioned four coherent questions in the NVAO assessment framework which together form the assessment ground for its review.

Based on the informative materials and the discussions during the first visit, the panel wants to dig deeper and get “under the skin” of the university in the second visit. This process of co-creation resulted in the following set of research questions, which were agreed upon at the end of October 2022.

Trail one is about **Quality Conduct and Quality Culture at programme level: how does the university's quality assurance system work in practice?** All aspects that are part of the



Quality Conduct and the Quality Culture at programme level can be addressed in the trail: PDCA-based quality reflections, quality assurance procedures, the education monitor, surveys and quality improvement plans, publicly available information, peer learning visits and screening at study programme level, and the current and future quality conduct systems 2.0 and 3.0. The panel wants to investigate this question through three (of the 49) programmes that have already gone through Quality Conduct 2.0: two programmes where the Education Quality Board decided on a positive quality assurance resolution, and one study programme that is now in a coaching trajectory. The panel wants to see how the university ensures the education quality of its individual programmes and in what (different) ways these concrete programmes maintain and/or (are supported to) improve their quality. Following the options offered by the university, the panel decided to investigate the question by looking at three programmes:

- Master of Science in Biomedical Engineering
- Bachelor & Master of Laws in Law
- Bachelor & Master of Arts in Art History, Musicology and Theatre Studies

The panel also discussed the proposal of the university on how to organise this trail during the second visit. Eventually, host and panel agreed to start with one extensive session with the governing level of all three programmes, followed by three shorter sessions with staff, student and alumni representatives of the respective Programme Committees.

Trail two addresses **the role of external stakeholders: how is the university engaged with the professional field, alumni and international peers to ensure the external view on its programmes?** The panel wanted to investigate this question initially via two programmes, but eventually decided in agreement with the university to expand its review to two programmes with a clear link to the professional field and one programme without such clear link. Given that trail one focuses on programmes that have gone through the Quality Conduct cycle, the panel wants to talk to at least one study programme where this is not yet the case. During the in-depth visit, the panel wants to find out how the programmes bring in the external perspective to identify and address quality, and how the input of the external perspective contributes to the programme's further development. Following the options offered by Ghent University, the panel decided to investigate the question by looking at three programmes:

- Master of Medicine in Specialist Medicine
- Bachelor and Master of Science in Sociology
- Master of Science in Statistical Data Analysis

The panel was aware that the Master of Medicine in Specialist Medicine is a comprehensive programme containing several specialisations. Hence, it invites the university to think about a way the panel could obtain a clear picture on the external view in this programme in an efficient way both during its preparation for this trail and during the second visit. In line with the organisation of the first trail, it was agreed that the panel would start with one extensive session with representatives of all three programmes, followed by three shorter meetings, one per programme, with external partners: employers, alumni and international peers.

The third trail is about **Multiperspectivism at central, faculty and programme level: how does the centrally formulated strategic education objective Think Broadly find its way to the faculties and trickles further down to the programmes?** The panel wanted to investigate how multiperspectivism is cascading and implemented, and how the university checks that/how this is done. When operationalising this research question for the second visit, the

panel invited the university to connect this strategic objective also to the societal context and the challenges this and other universities are meeting. The university proposed – and the panel agreed – to organise this trail in three dialogues: one to illustrate multiperspectivism at the level of courses and lecturers, one with examples at the level of faculty and programmes, and one – concluding – session with the central level.

During its internal meeting to fine-tune the research questions, the panel also looked at the **learning questions** the university had put forward:

- How to embed internationalisation (even) more in the university context
- How to ensure a manageable teaching assignment for staff, leaving sufficient time for research and education?
- How to invest in an optimal interaction between the initial study programmes and the lifelong learning initiatives?
- How to ensure that study programmes can implement the principles of futureproof curricula?
- How to innovate and at the same time rationalise and optimise the existing range of study programmes?
- Is the investment in Quality Conduct 2.0 sufficiently efficient to guarantee quality, and is the investment in proportion to the quality improvement in education?

According to the panel, the sixth question on Quality Conduct 2.0 is central to its assessment work during the institutional review. The panel is confident that it will be able to address this question during the visit and share its findings and considerations at the end of the review. The five other learning questions are formulated in an open way and seem to ask for advice on a range of specific issues with a broad application (internationalisation, futureproof curricula, etc.) across the university. The scope of the (panel in the) institutional review is to assess how the system of quality assurance is working. Hence, the panel suggests the university to identify possible concrete bottlenecks for the realisation of the educational policy and the implementation of the quality assurance system. In this way, the panel could establish together with the university how some of these topics questions can be addressed during the second visit, notably during the third trail on multiperspectivism. Learning questions can then be explored in a dialogue on possible future scenarios for quality assurance and education in the future. By asking critical questions, the panel can invite exploring possible scenarios. However, the panel does not seek to advise on the choices to be made.

At the end of October, the university and the panel also agreed upon the details of the **site visit programme**. The in-depth visit will take place on 12 and 13 December 2022. The first day will be dedicated to the trails on Quality Conduct and the External View, while the third topic of multiperspectivism, as well as the final deliberations of the panel and its final feedback to the university are planned for the second day.

## 2.6. Preparatory panel meeting

In order to prepare for the in-depth site visit, Ghent University provided the panel with eight documents: six reading guides covering the six programmes the panel would be addressing during the first two trails, and two handouts describing the multiperspectivism projects at course and programme level. Each reading guide contained hyperlinks to the most relevant programme-specific information. Moreover, a section on engaging external stakeholders had been added to the reading guides for trail 2. The panel appreciated these documents, as they

facilitated the work in getting acquainted with the six programmes and in managing its expectations with regard to the projects in the third trail.

The timely provision of these documents allowed the panel to prepare extensively and systematically the in-depth visit. First the panel reviewed the programme-related materials and provided its first impressions to the panel secretary, who compiled the comments and questions in a comprehensive document. This compilation also included general questions the panel wanted to raise during the third trail on multiperspectivism.

At the end of November 2022, the panel held an online preparatory meeting to discuss its first impressions. At this meeting the panel also reviewed the **site visit programme**, which had been fine-tuned since the finalisation of the research questions. Given the sheer number of questions in the compilation document and the envisaged – appreciative – approach of the panel to get ‘under the skin’ of the university, the panel asked the university to limit as much as possible the time foreseen for introductory presentations and pitches, and to leave ample time for in-depth discussions and dialogue during the sessions. The panel also asked the Education Department to emphasise to all participants that the panel did not intend to evaluate the respective programmes or projects, but essentially wanted to learn from the participants in the sessions how the quality assurance system at Ghent University works.

In so far as trail 1 on **Quality Conduct** is concerned, the panel members agreed in their appraisals that the quality assurance system at Ghent University is very comprehensive. It contains lots of information, which is organised and available in a very systematic way. Comments provided in the system are checked and followed up. At programme level, the PDCA-cycle seems to work in practice, and all degree programmes under review are documented in the same way. The Education Monitor, moreover, provides ample room for critical reflection. The panel could establish from reading the respective materials on the three programmes that there was a difference in performance/quality among the three programmes, notably in the one that is currently following a coaching trajectory. This finding, according to the panel, confirms that the system is effective. The panel also noticed with satisfaction how Ghent University is publicising information about its education quality, both in general terms and for each programme in particular. While panel members had listed plenty of (programme) specific questions in their appraisal, the overall consideration was that the system is robust. If anything, the system might contain too much information, which makes it challenging to see the big picture.

With regard to the second trail on the **external view**, the panel members noticed that all three programmes are indeed taking on board the perspective of alumni, professional field representatives and international peers. However, the degree of this input varies considerably across the programmes. Moreover, the panel was struck by the fact that information provided in the Education Monitors is almost exclusively restricted to external advice, with hardly any reference to external assessment. This requires further attention during the visit as the panel was under the impression that there should also be some kind of formal external assessment in the Quality Conduct system. Similarly, the panel noticed that the programmes often cited informal connections with international peers as a way to benchmark. While informal benchmarking as such is relevant, there should also be evidence of more thorough forms of benchmarking that go beyond low intensity and ad hoc exchanges.

Although it had not yet received the handouts of the specific projects that would be presented in the third trail on **multiperspectivism**, the panel agreed that it would not focus

on individual presentations but look for commonalities across the initiatives. Hence, the panel intended to question what multiperspectivism means for the participants, how it contributes to the quality of education, whether it reaches all students, and if the participants feel supported to develop such projects.

## 2.7. In-depth site visit

The second visit took place on Monday 12 and Tuesday 13 December 2022. On the eve of the visit, the panel gathered in person to finetune the questions and allocate the topics for discussion among the panel members. During the preparatory meeting and the site visit, the panel was again joined by the observer from the Luxembourg Ministry of Higher Education and Research.

On Monday 12 December the visit was organised at *Campus Sterre*, which hosts most of the Science faculty. The morning sessions were dedicated to trail one, while the afternoon sessions focused on the second trail and foresaw time for the panel to deliberate internally and have a reflection dialogue on the day's sessions with the university management.

### 2.7.1. Research theme 1 - Quality Conduct and Quality Culture at study programme level

In the first trail, the panel established how the university quality assurance system works in practice. The so-called Quality Conduct 2.0 came into being in 2018 after a thorough review of the original internal system (Quality Conduct 1.0) and under impulse of the new Flemish Quality Code. The panel held four interviews: one with representatives at the governing level of the three selected programmes and three sessions with representatives of the respective Programme Committees. Each session provided clarification on the way the university ensures the quality assurance processes of its study programmes, which in turn allowed the panel to combine the different pieces of the investigation puzzle into one coherent picture.

In the first session with the *programme governing levels*, the panel got a clear idea of how the Quality Conduct system is operating, notably in terms of interaction between the different levels. This interaction, according to the panel, is constructive and productive, an appraisal which was later on confirmed in the other interviews with representatives of individual study programme committees. Having asked the individual participants to indicate what they are particularly proud of, the panel was satisfied to notice that its initial impression of the Quality Conduct system had been correct: the Quality Conduct is indeed a system that is built on trust, shared ownership, involvement of all 'parties', continuous monitoring and efficient quality performance tools. However, the panel also got confirmation of its initial appreciation that the system is particularly robust, not to say (too) burdensome. The panel understands the rationale for initially setting up such a comprehensive system – as explained by the Director of Education and the quality assurance team – but the current workload is high and so is the burden on the respective actors to keep the system running. This element was mentioned by participants in all four sessions as the main point of concern. In this regard, the panel does not think that the Quality Conduct 2.0 system already meets the principle of lean administrative processes (as mentioned in the Critical Reflection p.35).

Finally, the panel got a satisfactory answer to its question on the information that is made available publicly. The panel noticed that the result of the individual programme reviews and the specific resolution of the Education Quality Board are shared on the public part of the university's website. However, the strengths and points of attention mentioned on the website are not identical to the findings in the resolution. According to the participants, there is common understanding that the outcome of the resolution should be made public – also in

case the programme is following a coaching trajectory – but that the summary of the resolution in terms of strengths and points for attention are at the discretion of the individual programmes. This means that in all cases, the text on the website is given a positive – and readable – twist addressing those issues that are important for (potential) students and their parents. The panel has checked the information that is publicly available on the three programmes in this trail and found that it provided a balanced and proper view on the respective programmes. The panel agrees with the statement of one of the participants that it is a strength of the programmes to identify and publicise also their own weakness.

The sessions with *representatives of three study programme committees* provided the panel with a good insight in the depth and breadth of interaction within these committees. While each programme and programme committee is different in many ways – programme structure, disciplinary content, size of student population, internal programme committee organisation – the panel noticed that each programme abides to the overall system to the best of its abilities, in its own way and its own pace. The panel gathered from the three interviews that the Programme Committees are knowledgeable about the quality assurance system and its principles, and use the components of the PDCA-cycle appropriately. In all interviews, participants mentioned that they receive good support from ‘the system’, i.e. the central education services and its quality assurance staff in the respective faculties. One participant mentioned that the interaction with the Programme Monitor is done by administrative staff and that the programme committee would be lost without this staff. The programme that is currently in a coaching trajectory, moreover, emphasised that the programme review with members of the Education Quality Board was a positive experience and not judgemental. The reviewers noticed that the programme was on the right track, pointed to actions the programme was already undertaken, and provided very practical and hands-on guidance and coaching. The panel also heard in all sessions that students play an important role in the programme committees and that each committee operates as a team in a very collegial way between professors, students, alumni and quality assurance staff.

Finally, the panel gathered in all three sessions that the system – and the programme committees implementing the system – is very much geared towards continuous improvement. Comparing the current Quality Conduct system with the previous external programme accreditations, one interviewee mentioned that the new approach with the programme monitor is on the one hand irritating because it requires a lot of work, but on the other hand it forces one to think constantly how to improve and to check at least once a year whether the programme delivers what it set out to do. In recent years, programme committees are more and more honest in reporting on their plans and achievements. In this way, the system has moved from a quality check by a panel coming from outside the university to a quality culture developed in-house. Another participant indicated that the quality culture is engrained in the system: “when signals of problems pop up, we try to detect and address them.” Asked about any flaws in the system, one interlocutor indicated that there is a tension between the advisory role of the Programme Committee and being owner of the quality: it is difficult to be responsible when one can only advise. In this regard, the Programme Committee has a fuzzy and unclear position: “if the committee has a vision but the reality does not move, then it is like a parliament without a government. Programme Committees and their chairs have no authority to tell colleagues what to do: in theory we advise, but in reality we are expected to implement.”

In the *reflections and dialogue session* later that day, the panel shared its overall positive impressions on the day and on the way the Quality Conduct system is implemented in the

three – very different – programmes. Three issues were addressed in particular: regarding the sheer number of operational objectives, the university representatives conceded that this was a fair comment at this stage of development. While it was relevant to have formulated so many objectives when the system was created, the current situation is such that probably 10-15 objectives are now reached obviously by all programmes. Hence, it is conceivable – also from a psychological point of view – to reduce the number of objectives from 39 to 20 or maximum 25 in the new Quality Conduct system 3.0. Moreover, the university would support – in the new system as the current system does not allow – that programmes set a few objectives of their own, provided they develop indicators and are in the position to collect data. The university representatives indicated that they are also aware of the second issue: the workload and the administrative burden that comes with a robust PDCA-cycle and Quality Conduct-system. They agreed that the system was very burdensome at the start when all indicators had to be gathered and the baseline situation of each and every objective had to be decided. In the meantime, however, much of the basic Plan and Do information is gathered leaving more time for the Check and Act components. Nonetheless, the attention to Check and Act also requires time and effort. In preparing for the future 3.0 system, the university ensured the panel that it will also take into account the workload issue. Similarly, the Education Quality Board will continue to play its role in the implementation of quality assurance resolutions, thereby taking into consideration the workload with a view to keeping the entire system sustainable. Finally, the panel wondered when and how it is decided that a programme has completed its coaching trajectory. The participants indicated that the components of the improvement plan are stipulated and that every three months, the programme submits a progress report on these elements to the Education Quality Board. When most tasks are solved, the actions and results are put in the programme monitor for review by the Education Quality Board; in case the Board considers that the programme can proceed on its own, then the coaching trajectory is finished and the coaching trajectory label/judgement is taken away, also on the public website.

#### 2.7.2. Research theme 2 – the view of external stakeholders

In the second trail, the panel investigated how the professional field, alumni and international peers are engaged to ensure an external view on the study programmes. The panel again held four interviews: one with study programme representatives and three sessions with external stakeholders of the selected programmes. Also in this trail, the information provided in the different sessions contributed to the overall picture of the panel on the role of external stakeholders in the programmes.

In the first interview with *programme representatives*, the participants described the overall framework for external involvement. Asked whether programmes can organise the external view themselves or have to comply with expectations from the central level, it became clear that there are three minimum criteria within and beyond which every programme is at liberty to organise the external perspective. The university expects every programme to ensure structural and systematic involvement of external stakeholders; in case there are university-wide surveys of external stakeholders, then these results should be discussed by the Programme Committees; and every four years or in case of an upcoming major programme revision, programmes should organise a review by external peers. Participants agreed that the external perspective is more prominently present than in the past because it belongs to the responsibility of the programme now and because the external perspective is part of the yearly quality assurance meeting in the framework of Quality Conduct 2.0. At this occasion, programmes are provided with advice and support and learn about good practices in other programmes. The panel was informed about the ‘Inside out, outside in’ cards which provide

inspiration for actions study programmes can undertake to involve external stakeholders in assuring education quality.

Comparing the current situation to the way the external perspective was organised in the previous NVAO-based system of programme accreditation, participants had a sense of liberation: more honesty, more in-depth discussions, less ‘window-dressing’ and/or ‘armed discussions’. In several sessions – also in the previous trail – participants indicated that on their own request, certain programmes do continue to be formally reviewed by external peers in the framework of international accreditation exercises. These accreditations constitute a quality mark of excellence and also serve a marketing purpose: obtaining such recognition leads to attracting more (international) students.

The panel gathered from the interviews with *external stakeholders* that all programmes do comply with the above-mentioned minimum criteria and often go beyond these requirements in a way that particularly suits the individual programme. In this regard the participants provided nice examples of external programme involvement. The panel was satisfied to learn about an active advisory board featuring a diverse range of field representatives, about a yearly programme event where students and staff meet with alumni and employers, about international peers who visit Ghent and are invited to discuss specific curriculum components such as the organisation of the master thesis or the formulation of intended learning outcomes, and about a study visit to benchmark the programme with a similar programme in the Netherlands. These initiatives certainly contributed to making the programmes known to the outside world and to bringing the outside world into the programmes. In addition, several participants indicated that their individual contributions as (newly graduated) alumni or field representatives have made a difference for individual courses and programmes. Other participants emphasised that over time, programmes and courses have been connecting much more with the work field. Nonetheless, the panel also noticed that in most cases these initiatives led to rather informal ways of advice or benchmarking and would not really qualify as external review. This finding certainly applies to external stakeholders reviewing or speaking out on the end level of programme graduates. In this regard, the panel noticed that the above-mentioned inspiration cards lead to study programmes setting up a variety of advisory actions that are relevant per se, but do not yet lead to external stakeholders validating the programme quality. The panel acknowledges, in line with what was already announced during the discussion of the research themes at the end of the exploratory visit, that the external view is still in the process of being implemented across all faculties and programmes.

This last point on the external review was discussed again in the *reflection and dialogue session* with the university management. Participants indicated that it is the task of the Education Quality Board to check whether quality processes are in place but that it is not within its remit to judge the quality of the programme content. This quality needs to be assured through the external perspective, which can be organised in different ways but is expected to review learning outcomes, programme course materials, assessment methods and the end level of students every four years. This review should lead to a formal text, which is discussed in the Programme Committee, becomes part of the programme monitor and following the committee’s reflections may give raise to actions for improvement. This system is currently being implemented and was finalised for 20 programmes. The panel approves of both the system principles and the programme autonomy to organise the review. However, the panel also announced that it would advise the university to ensure that the external

review also includes some kind of formal assessment – and validation by external reviewers – that students who are about to graduate meet the end level requirements of the programme.

In the framework of its investigation into the external perspective/quality assurance system within the *specialist medicine programme*, the panel had some doubts about the feasibility of the university's quality assurance system for this particular programme. According to the university management, the programme is embedded in the system as much as all other degree programmes. Nonetheless, participants confirmed what was mentioned in an earlier session that the type of education/training provided in this programme makes it difficult to organise the Programme Committee with a similar depth and breadth of involvement and representation as in other programmes. Moreover, the workload in the programme is high, for students and for staff, which makes the work of the Programme Committee even more cumbersome. According to the panel, the programme should consider organising the dialogue between students and stakeholders in a more structural way thereby creating a dynamic that goes beyond the level of informality.

The sessions on Tuesday 13 December took place at *Het Pand*, the university's congress centre located in the city centre of Ghent. Big part of the day was dedicated to the third and final trail of the site visit.

### 2.7.3. Research theme 3 - multiperspectivism at central, faculty and programme level

In the third trail the panel inquired how the centrally formulated strategic education objective Think Broadly finds its way to the faculties and trickles further down to the study programmes. The panel held three extensive interviews: one with staff and students developing multiperspectivism projects at course unit level, one with staff initiating multiperspectivism at faculty and study programme level, and one with the university management overlooking multiperspectivism at central level.

The first two sessions started with *short presentations of initiatives* that are currently being developed and implemented at Ghent University. These initiatives are highly diverse and were linked to one of five strategic education objectives: think broadly, keep researching, cultivate talent, contribute, and extend horizons. As announced after its preparatory meeting, the panel did not enter into a discussion of the individual actions but asked participants to use the experience with their actions to answer the panel's questions. This approach led to intensive and interesting discussions. Across the board, the panel gathered that all projects had grown out of individual initiatives that were backed up and facilitated by study programmes, faculties and the central university level. Often starting at a relatively small scale, several initiatives had by now gone (far) beyond the borders of what was initially foreseen and reached stakeholders across the university. Moreover, several initiatives involved actors from outside the initial group of developers, and often included societal partners and/or other higher education institutions, such as local university colleges or partners in the European University Network. Often the initiators of these actions had become champions in their domain and were by now known also outside the borders of Ghent University. Their initiatives continue to be supported and the individuals concerned indicated that their ongoing enthusiasm for these education projects is also recognised and rewarded through the career development model that is promoted in the new human resource policy. Notwithstanding their enthusiasm – or better: because of their enthusiasm – the initiators indicated that they themselves as well as their closest collaborators are concerned about their work-life balance. After all, there is also some regular teaching and research to be done, which cannot be 'outsourced' entirely to colleagues in the department.



The panel also inquired to what extent these initiatives reach/target all relevant students. While certain projects are by their very nature limited to a restricted group of e.g. talented students in the Honours programme, other actions are being developed to reach as broad a student audience as possible, or target specifically at a mixture of local and international (exchange) students. Moreover, the panel was informed that the university is currently advocating for every study programme to include at least 5 ECTS of open choice courses; this course size befits several initiatives presented to the panel. For the future, the university is also contemplating to enlarge this open choice to 15 ECTS of cross-disciplinary courses in the framework of its future-proof curricula.

Finally, the panel indicated that similar initiatives also exist at other universities, which are often labelled as interdisciplinary projects without reference to multiperspectivism. According to the participants, several projects were initiated at a time when “Dare to Think” was already the motto of the university, but multiperspectivism was not yet the key concept it has become. Multiperspectivism, according to the participants, goes beyond mere interdisciplinarity as it also includes diversity, sustainability and environmental awareness. The latter concepts were part and parcel of several initiatives presented in the two sessions. One participant mentioned that interdisciplinarity was ‘hot’ a few years ago, while multiperspectivism is the new thing: it is educating the problem solvers of the future who do not only take into account the technical part but are also concerned about the societal aspect. For another interviewee, multiperspectivism is not so much a driving force of their efforts but a hanger (in Dutch: *kapstok*) for the diversity of projects in the university. At the end of the two sessions, the panel found that the projects were very inspiring and gave a rather diverse image whereby multiperspectivism is the federating concept. The support and recognition by the university and its human resources policy are likely to encourage other staff members to undertake similar initiatives.

The discussion on multiperspectivism with the *university management* was equally informative. Asked about the potential reach of the initiatives, participants confirmed that it is the ambition of the university that all students take a multiperspectivism look at the discipline they are studying. While the projects presented are very clear examples of this ambition, there are also less explicit ways to tackle content matter in a multiperspectivism way. Moreover, the university expects that also staff demonstrates a multiperspectivism attitude in the way they teach in their courses, e.g. by offering different paradigms for analysis or by giving examples from different application domains. Similarly, it is rewarding for students to be taught by staff with very different opinions on how to solve a particular issue, for instance in the domain of economics. In the end, it is up to the teaching staff members at Ghent University to ensure that their students (learn to) think for themselves. The participants also emphasised that the projects had not been chosen at random but addressed each strategic objective where multiperspectivism is the baseline. Multiperspectivism for that matter also forms the common roof under which the strategic objectives are addressed in the faculties and programmes. This means that all students will be exposed to multiperspectivism. This statement can be backed up by hard facts as the education objective Dare to Think and Multiperspectivism is operationalised in the study programme monitor: “A critical mindset, different perspectives, open-mindedness, pluralism, and tolerance of other opinions are key elements in the study programme’s education policy and practice;” and “the study programme stimulates multi-, inter- and transdisciplinarity (...).” The above-mentioned elements are all integrated in the study programme competencies and embedded in Ghent University’s Competency Model. At the end of this third session, the panel concluded that

also for this research trail, the different pieces of the investigation puzzle were coming together.

## 2.8. Internal panel deliberations

To conclude the two-day in-depth site visit, the panel deliberated internally on its overall appreciation of the institutional review and had a final feedback dialogue with the institution. The panel has used the internal session to discuss the outcome of the second day's trail before moving on to a comprehensive review of the overall exercise. With regard to the latter, the panel took into account its findings from the initial appraisal, the key topics identified during the first preparatory meeting and addressed during the exploratory visit, the research questions formulated in view of the in-depth visit, and the results of the discussions in the three trails.

Just as it did at the end of the exploratory visit, the panel considered the four coherent questions that serve as the assessment ground for NVAO's institutional review:

- Is the educational policy in line with the educational vision of the institution and the societal challenge it is facing within its own context?
- Does the institution ensure the effectiveness of its educational policy; in other words, how does the institution work towards the set goals?
- Within this policy, is the quality of each accredited programme confirmed in an internationally accepted way?
- Does the institution demonstrate a quality culture at all levels?

Before sharing their individual positive impressions and points for improvement, the panellists unanimously answered the above questions in a positive way. Then the panel formulated key findings, considerations and suggestions with an eye on this report and in view of the concluding dialogue with the university management.

By way of preliminary remark, the panel agreed that it had definitely needed the in-depth site visit to come to a full appreciation of the university. The institutional review assesses whether a higher education institution pursues its educational policy and its conduct for confirming the quality of its programmes in a qualitative manner. At the end of the two visits, the panel is convinced that this qualification applies to Ghent University.

According to the panel, the mission, vision and strategy of Ghent University are appropriate and have been translated in relevant educational objectives and policies. The panel is impressed by the holistic way in which the six strategic objectives trickle down in the faculties and programmes and are operationalised, implemented and monitored through a coherent and robust system.

Within this system, multiperspectivism constitutes both the baseline for and the roof under which the other strategic objectives are addressed. In this regard, the panel considers that the quality assurance system fully aligns with the mission and vision of the university. The PDCA-cycle in all its components – notably but not exclusively the extensive Education Monitor and the comprehensive data collection – works nicely.

Throughout its investigation – from the Critical Reflection up to the testimonials and discussions on multiperspectivism – the panel sensed a strong commitment to quality culture and to continuous enhancement. This is an important feature of the university and aligns very much with the requirements of the new accreditation system in Flanders. Although there are

still steps to take and goals to attain, what is available within Ghent University is both relevant and promising. In this regard, the focus of the university on the professionalisation of its teachers is an important element in realising these objectives.

The panel appreciates the research-based education and teaching at Ghent University. As a higher education institution, it offers room for innovative projects that impact on education, teaching and research. In fact, several multiperspectivism projects have underlined the nexus between research and education and have shown that Think Broadly is conducive to bringing research and education together. Moreover, the panel was satisfied to notice that several of these projects are not restricted to the inner walls of the university but involve societal partners locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.

The attention for innovative education projects can only materialise if these are taken forward by enthusiastic and committed staff members who feel their efforts are appreciated and rewarded. In this regard, the panel sees the new human resources policy and its principles for promotion that also recognise excellence in education as a strength.

Finally, the panel confirms the relevance and robustness of the Quality Conduct system. It has taken some time to realise, but eventually the panel understood the rationale behind the system. The panel is struck by the number and enthusiasm of the participants involved in the Programme Committees and appreciates the way programmes assess their own performance and set their own objectives for the near future. The role of the Education Quality Board and the way it follows up on its resolutions make sense according to the panel. While it initially was not clear who owned the quality system, the panel found out to that there is shared ownership for the system within the institution. The Quality Conduct system is about being accountable; the panel noticed that this accountability also extends to the wider public as the conclusions of the Education Quality Board are published in a relevant way on the university's public website.

In terms of **recommendations**, the panel sees following areas for improvement. While the internal quality assurance system is robust, it is also burdensome. According to the panel, the central level is not entirely aware of the sheer amount of work it still takes to feed the system and keep it as performant as it is today. Hence the suggestion of the panel is to make Quality Conduct 3.0 more lean in terms of objectives and administrative work.

Moreover, the programme-related discussions have shown that several programmes are not only up to standard but also aspiring for excellence. In the future the university may want to accommodate that such programmes focus their efforts on maintaining this excellence. At this very moment, however, the priority of the university should be to continue supporting and monitoring those programmes that have not yet received a resolution by the Education Quality Board, did not yet go through an external review or are implementing a coaching trajectory.

Making the internal quality assurance system lighter, however, does not apply to the external view. On the contrary, the transition to Quality Conduct 3.0 should be used by the university to make a distinction between external contacts and cooperation on the one hand, and assessment and validation by external parties on the other hand. The panel has established that all programmes involve three types of external stakeholders. According to the panel there is room for making more, better and systematic use of these stakeholders, for instance by including them in an advisory board. In this way, the informal contacts and feedback will

reach a higher level of systematic advice. According to the panel it is absolutely necessary that peer assessment is, becomes and remains an important part of the quality cycle, and that every programme incorporates some sort of external validation to sign off quality. After all, there should be no hesitation whatsoever about the quality of the existing programmes, and some form of external validation will only strengthen this (self-)confidence in programme quality to the outside world.

While the new human resources policy is overall positive, it does entail that staff members have to account for what their colleagues do; hence the room for individual staff is depending on what others are doing. This system introduces a risk that is not easy to solve but nonetheless needs attention.

Finally, the panel considers that the vision on education of Ghent University is very specific and based on its slogans/concepts Dare to Think and Multiperspectivism. However, there is room for making more explicit what multiperspectivism means: throughout the visits the panel heard it is the core element of the university's vision on education, it is an attitude and a culture. In fact, multiperspectivism seems to be used as a kind of 'passe-partout' for all kinds of strategic objectives and viewpoints. According to the panel, the concept requires further clarification - both within the University and in its external communication - if Ghent University wants to use the full potential of multiperspectivism as an identity marker and a force for transformation.

## 2.9. Dialogue with the institution: final feedback

In the final dialogue with Ghent University, the panel chair presented the most important outcomes of its internal deliberation, featuring both positive elements and a few suggestions for improvement. The chair also announced that the panel's report would include a more comprehensive assessment of its investigation into the performance of the institution.

In terms of **strengths**, Ghent University is an institution that offers room for innovative projects which impact on its education and teaching. This is made possible among others by enthusiastic staff members who feel rewarded through the new human resources system.

The panel also noticed a close relationship between research and teaching. In many cases the concept of multiperspectivism brings research and education together.

Although it took quite some time before the panel fully understood multiperspectivism, the concept is unique to the institution and constitutes both a baseline and a roof for the strategic objectives of the university.

According to the panel, the quality assurance system is fully in line with the mission and vision of the university. The PDCA-cycle works, as is shown by the extensive collection of data and the education monitor. Quality Conduct 2.0 allows the university to ensure programme quality.

The strong commitment of staff to the university, to the students and to the quality assurance system demonstrates that there is a shared quality culture within the institution. While the panel initially wondered who owned the quality system, it found out throughout the review that there is shared ownership for the system within the institution. According to the panel, this is also a feature of quality culture.

In sum, the panel concludes positively on the institutional review and will advise NVAO to take a similar decision.

In addition to these positive elements and outcome, the panel shared a few **suggestions**, which can be seen as advice on the journey of the university from Quality Conduct 2.0 to 3.0. First and foremost the university needs a less burdensome system, even if the current Quality Conduct 2.0 is already lighter than version 1.0. There are different ways to alleviate the system, possibly by setting less objectives and indicators.

However, a lighter system does not mean that it should reduce the role of the external stakeholders, on the contrary: the external validation of the study programmes is important, and this entails more than external contacts and cooperation. The panel is aware that the university has a system with regulations in place on this point, so it advises the university to make sure that these requirements are followed and that programmes comply to this.

Finally, the panel thinks that the concept of multiperspectivism is an identity marker of Ghent University. In terms of communication, however, the university requires a better, shorter and clearer presentation towards the outside world.

### 3. Conclusion

Overlooking its entire investigation the panel concludes positively on the institutional review of Ghent University.

An institutional review assesses whether a higher education institution pursues its educational policy and its conduct for confirming the quality of its study programmes in a qualitative manner. At the end of almost four months of investigation including three days of on-site visit featuring twenty interview sessions, the panel is convinced that this qualification applies to Ghent University.

The panel arrives at this conclusion based on the informative and well-written Critical Reflection, on the discussions during the exploratory site visit which clarified several of the topics it had earmarked for further attention, and on the wealth of insights it gained during its in-depth review of three research themes: quality conduct and quality culture, external view, and multiperspectivism.

Throughout the entire review, Ghent University has demonstrated convincingly that it implements its education policy in a qualitative way and that it displays a concrete quality culture at all levels. According to the panel, the university's education policy aligns neatly with its education vision and works purposefully towards achieving its education objectives. Having established robust provisions for quality assurance, the university is in a position to guarantee the quality of its study programmes through the in-house Quality Conduct system.

According to the panel, the mission, vision and strategy of Ghent University have been translated in relevant educational objectives and policies. The identity marker of the education vision is the concept of multiperspectivism, which serves as baseline and roof for the other education objectives. These strategic objectives trickle down in a holistic way in the faculties and the study programmes and are operationalised, implemented and monitored in a coherent and robust system based on the PDCA-cycle. The panel considers that this system works nicely and addresses all four Plan – Do – Check – Act components in equally great detail.

Throughout its investigation, the panel sensed a strong commitment to quality culture and to continuous enhancement. These are important features and comply fully with the requirements of the Quality Code of the Flemish higher education authorities.

The panel appreciates the research-based approach to education and teaching at Ghent University and by the number and variety of innovative projects, which often involve societal partners locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. These initiatives are developed and taken forward by enthusiastic staff members who feel their efforts are appreciated and rewarded. In this regard, the panel sees the new human resources policy and its principles for promotion that also recognise excellence in education as a strength.

In so far as the Quality Conduct system is concerned, the panel appreciates the number, variety and commitment of the professors, service staff, students and alumni involved in the Programme Committees. The panel saw ownership for programme quality, as well as an ongoing commitment to enhance this quality. The Quality Conduct system balances control with trust and accountability. The panel is satisfied to notice that this accountability also

extends to the wider public as the resolutions of the Education Quality Board are published on the university's website.

In addition to all these positive considerations, the panel also has some recommendations, i.e. points of attention that are likely to strengthen the performance of the university in the future. Hence, the panel advises Ghent University to consider making:

- the Quality Conduct system more lean, and thus less cumbersome and time-consuming, in the future;
- more, better and systematic use of external stakeholders, whose role should go beyond informal contacts and ad hoc advise, to ensure programme quality;
- external peer assessment - including some form of external validation that signs off on the programme quality - an important part of the quality cycle, and apply it systematically in each study programme;
- more explicit internally, as well as in its communication to the outside world, what multiperspectivism means, and thus what Ghent University stands for.

Finally, the panel wants to mention that it took some time before it got 'under the skin' of the university and that it needed the two-day in-depth visit to come to a full appreciation of the university. At the end of its investigation, the pieces of the puzzle came together. All is well that ends well. However, this result would not have been possible without the high quality materials provided on paper and online, the contextualisation provided during the dialogue sessions with the university management, and the lively, interactive and open exchanges with enthusiastic and committed participants.

## Appendix 1: Composition of the panel

The assessment was carried out by a panel of experts appointed and trained by NVAO. It is composed as follows:

**Agneta Bladh** (*chair*) former State Secretary in the Swedish Ministry of Education and Science, former Rector of the University of Kalmar (now part of Linnaeus University) and former Chair of the Swedish Research Council. She was the government-appointed Inquiry Chair of the Inquiry on increased internationalisation of higher education institutions (2017-2018). Prof. Bladh is member of several governing boards in the Higher Education sector in Sweden.

**Bernard Coulie** (*panel member*) former Rector of the Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL). Prof. Coulie is full professor of Armenian, Georgian and Byzantine studies, European history, culture, integration and identity.

**Ann Demeulemeester** (*panel member*) managing Director of Familiehulp vzw and Chair of Odisee University of Applied Sciences. Ann Demeulemeester is former Vice-President of NVAO and former General Secretary of ACW (umbrella organisation of Christian employee organisations in Flanders).

**Pepijn Nollet** (*student panel member*) president of the student council at KU Leuven in the academic year 2021-2022. Pepijn Nollet graduated in July 2022 and holds a Master in Public Management and Policy, and a Master in History from KU Leuven.

**Marja Sutela** (*panel member*) Vice President for Education at Tampere University and Doctor of Administrative Sciences in the field of Public Law. Prof. Sutela is expert in pedagogical leadership and change management in higher education institutions; and member of the Learning & Teaching Steering Committee at the European University Association (EUA).

**Frank van der Duijn Schouten** (*panel member*) interim chair of the Executive Board of the Open University and emeritus professor of Applied Mathematics. Prof. van der Duijn Schouten is former interim Rector Magnificus of Erasmus University Rotterdam, former Rector Magnificus of Tilburg University and VU University Amsterdam.

The panel was assisted by:

- **Veerle Conings** (process coordinator), NVAO policy advisor.
- **Mark Delmartino** (external secretary), managing director MDM Consultancy BV.

All panel members have signed the NVAO Code of Ethics.



## Appendix 2: Programme for the dialogue with the institution

### Exploratory site visit

**Tuesday 11 October 2022** – location: Boekentoren

08:30 Welcoming of the panel, Meet-and-Greet

09.15 Session 1: About Ghent University

10.30 Session 2: Education vision, education policy and quality culture

11.45 Session 3: Quality assurance: quality conduct 2.0

12.45 Lunch break

13.30 Students' moment – at student house "Therminaal"

14.30 An illustration: education policy and quality culture put into practice - University Forum (UFO)

16.00 Open timeslot

16.30 Internal deliberation panel

17.30 Dialogue with the institution

18.30 End of exploratory site visit

### In-depth site visit

**Monday 12 December 2022** – location: Campus Sterre

*Trail 1: Quality culture and quality conduct at study programme level*

08.30 Session 1: Quality Culture and Quality Conduct

10.00 Session 2: Master of Science in Biomedical Engineering

10.50 Session 3: Bachelor & Master of Laws in Law

11.40 Session 4: Bachelor & Master of Arts in Art History, Musicology and Theatre Studies

12.30 Lunch break

*Trail 2: The view of external stakeholders*

13.30 Session 1: Programme representatives on the external view

15.00 Session 2: Master of Medicine in Specialist Medicine

15.50 Session 3: Master of Science in Statistical Data Analysis

16.40 Session 4: Bachelor & Master of Science in Sociology

17.30 Internal deliberation panel

19.00 Reflections and dialogue with the institution

**Tuesday 13 December 2022** – location: Het Pand

*Trail 3: Multiperspectivism at central, faculty and study programme level*

09.00 Session 1: Multiperspectivism at the lecturers and course level

10.45 Session 2: Multiperspectivism at the faculty and programme level

12.00 Lunch break

13.00 Session 3: Multiperspectivism at the central level

14.15 Internal deliberation panel

16.15 Dialogue with the institution: final feedback

17.15 End of in-depth site visit

## Appendix 3: Accountability

The assessment included in this report was carried out on the basis of the *“Institutional Review Assessment Framework”* of June 2020, as ratified by the Flemish government on 27 November 2020.

After the application submitted by the institution was declared admissible, NVAO set up an expert panel. This panel was approved by the executive board of NVAO. The institution did not object to the panel composition.

The panel prepared for the assessment on the basis of the documents provided by the institution. Prior to a preparatory meeting, each panel member made an initial appraisal and questions were listed.

During the preparatory work, the panel further discussed all the information obtained and also prepared the dialogue with the institution.

In line with NVAO's Appreciative Approach, the panel further explored the context of the institution during the dialogue and, on the basis of this, conducted an investigation that enabled it to develop joint insights with the institution about the status of the implementation of education policy and confirming quality within the institution.

During the concluding work, the panel discussed all the information obtained and translated it into a holistic judgement. The panel has reached this conclusion in complete independence.

The total of available data has been processed into a draft assessment report. Once all panel members had agreed with the contents of the assessment report, the chair of the panel adopted the assessment report. The assessment report adopted by the chair was submitted to NVAO.

## Appendix 4: Overview of the studied materials

### *Materials made available with the application*

- Critical Reflection on Ghent University's Education Policy

### *Materials put at disposition online*

- Ghent University's Education Policy and Quality Assurance
- Education Tips for Lecturers and Study Programmes
- Ghent University's business Intelligence System
- Faculties' and Study Programmes' Education Monitors
- The Institutional Education monitor

### *Documents made available during the dialogue*

- Handouts on topics presented during the poster session (exploratory site visit)
- Reading guides on degree programmes discussed during trails 1 and 2
- Handouts on multiperspectivism initiatives presented in trail 3



## Colofon

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