

Report of the Panel of the external review of NVAO
September 2012

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Summary

Having assessed various documents and oral evidence through a site visit, the Panel is convinced that NVAO acts in compliance with the ENQA membership regulations and is in substantial compliance with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. The Panel therefore recommends to the Board of ENQA that NVAO's Full Membership of ENQA be confirmed for a further period of five years.

The Panel concludes that NVAO fully complies with the ENQA membership criteria 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 and substantially complies with the ENQA membership criterion 1.

A list of the recommendations of the Panel is provided in section 5.2 but, in short, the main areas for further improvements relates to public information in various senses and to the formulation of explicit and public criteria about how NVAO reaches its accreditation decisions in relation to the programme assessments in all cases.

During the site visit, interviewees mentioned several times that NVAO is in a "transition state" as models and procedures for quality assurance are currently being changed in relation to Flanders or have recently been changed in the Netherlands. It is the view of the Panel that a situation of change and development is to be expected for most quality assurance agencies. The Panel recognises that NVAO and its partners have work ahead in order to establish the institutional assessment approach in Flanders as well as to consolidate the new practice in the Netherlands. The Panel encourages all the parties to learn from the experience gathered thus far.

1 Background and outline of the review process

ENQA's regulations require all full member agencies to undergo an external cyclical review, at least once every five years, in order to verify that they fulfil the membership provisions. In November 2004, the General Assembly of ENQA agreed that the third part of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) should be incorporated into the membership provisions of its regulations. Substantial compliance with the ESG thus became the principal criterion for Full membership of ENQA.

This is the report of the review of NVAO undertaken in June 2012 for the purpose of determining whether the agency meets the criteria for full membership of ENQA. The process in general, including the structure of the present report, was run in accordance with the *Guidelines for external reviews of quality assurance agencies in the European Higher Education Area*.

The present review of NVAO has been coordinated by ENQA. This is the second external review of NVAO according to the ESG. The first review took place in 2007.

The Panel for the 2012 external review of NVAO, appointed by ENQA, was composed as follows:

- Tove Blytt Holmen, Director of the Department of Quality Assurance, NOKUT, Norway (Chair)
- Signe Ploug Hansen, Director of Methodology, EVA, Denmark (Secretary)
- Julian Tobias Hiller, Student at Leibniz University of Hannover, Germany
- Elie Milgrom, Emeritus professor, consultant in professional development of teaching staff, Belgium
- Dr. Norma Ryan, Director of the Quality Promotion Unit, University College Cork, Ireland

The Panel was provided with ENQA's Terms of Reference (ToR), including a suggested timeline (see annex A). A short presentation of the Panel members is provided in annex B.

NVAO produced a self-evaluation report (SER) which, together with the attachments to it, provided a substantial portion of the evidence that the Panel used for its analysis and to reach its conclusions. The Panel conducted a site visit to validate the statements made in the self-evaluation report, to clarify any points at issue, and to obtain further relevant documents. For an overview of assessed documents, see annex C. Before finalising the report, the Panel provided an opportunity for NVAO to comment on the factual accuracy of the draft report.

The Panel confirms that it was given access to all the documents it requested and to all people it wished to consult with throughout the review.

2 Glossary of acronyms

ECA: European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education

ENQA: European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

EQAR: European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education

EVA: The Danish Evaluation Institute

ESG: Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher education Area

HEI: Higher Education Institution

NOKUT: Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education

NVAO: The Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders

QANU: Quality Assurance Netherlands Universities

SER: Self-evaluation report

ToR: Terms of Reference

VLHORA: The Flemish Council of University Colleges

VLIR: Flemish Interuniversity Council

3 Introduction

i. Purpose(s) of the review

In its SER dated April 16th 2012, NVAO describes its “main objectives” for the review as follows:

1. Renewal of NVAO’s full membership of ENQA and extended EQAR-registration.
2. A first external reflection on the new accreditation system in the Netherlands.
3. Contribution to NVAO’s internal quality monitoring.

ENQA’s ToR, dated February 2012, identifies the review of NVAO to be a type A review. However, the ToR also stated: *“In addition to ... the review aims to give a first external reflection on the new accreditation system in the Netherlands.”*

When asking ENQA for clarification on its mandate, the Panel received the following answer: *“... NVAO would like to know from the Panel whether the new system is fit for the purposes NVAO wants to achieve, in accordance with the ESG/ENQA membership criteria and which advice could be given to improve it ...”*

Furthermore: *“... There are no particular expectations on the Panel for n.3 as this is not part of the purposes agreed between ENQA and NVAO. ... what is meant by “Contribute to NVAO’s internal quality monitoring” is that the overall result of the review, all Panel’s recommendations will contribute to the agency’s quality monitoring.”*

The Panel understands its mandate was to conduct a type A review where the focus has to be upon the current status and not upcoming developments (as per *“Guidelines for external reviews ...”*), i.e. it should investigate programme accreditation in Flanders and the new approach in the Netherlands combining institutional audit and programme accreditation. The Panel’s reflections around the new system in the Netherlands will concentrate upon whether the system supports the ESG or whether it incorporates elements that are in contradiction with the ESG.

The Panel finds it important to point out that it has decided to rely upon the assessments made in the first ENQA review of NVAO in 2007 in relation to those general characteristics that have not changed between 2007 and 2012.

Being the accreditation organisation for both Netherlands and Flanders, NVAO is the body which makes all the accreditation decisions. However, the assessments of existing programmes on which the programme accreditation decisions of NVAO are based are carried out by other quality assurance bodies. Some of these are members of ENQA as a result of evaluations similar to the present one. The Panel has noted that VLHORA, VLIR and QANU have all undergone independent external reviews (in 2008, 2009 and 2010 respectively) and have been reviewed specifically with regard to their alignment and compliance with the ENQA membership criteria and thus the relevant sections of the ESG. The Panel has decided not to re-visit these assessments or to question the evidence presented in those assessments but to accept the decisions of the review panels that conducted those assessments. Thus in those topics of relevance to this Panel in its review of NVAO, the Panel took as read the compliance of these agencies

and accepted the credentials and expertise of these agencies in relation to the quality assurance activities undertaken.

As regards the relation between NVAO and the quality assurance agencies the Panel finds it important to note that the agencies are not perceived as subcontractors to NVAO neither by NVAO, nor by the agencies themselves, nor by the Panel. In various dictionaries a subcontractor is generally defined as an individual or in many cases a business that signs a contract to perform a part or all of the obligations of another's contract. In its decision making of existing programmes, NVAO has to build upon quality assurance performed by other agencies as regulated by law and the assessments undertaken by the agencies are thus not based on a contract with NVAO. In case of assessments of new programmes and institutional assessments NVAO performs external quality assurance by its own panels.

ii. The place of NVAO in the quality assurance structure of its jurisdiction

This subsection and subsection iii are largely based on the background information provided in the SER of NVAO. All external stakeholders interviewed during the site visit expressed the view that the SER provides a reliable and adequate presentation of NVAO and the systems of external quality assurance in the Netherlands and Flanders and the Panel is thus confident that the information provided in the SER is fully reliable.

NVAO, the Accreditation Organisation for the Netherlands and Flanders [*Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie*] was formally established by the Dutch and Flemish governments as a bi-national organisation on February 1st 2005. NVAO is thus the official, public and bi-national accreditation organisation in the Netherlands and Flanders. NVAO covers all types of higher education institutions (HEI) within its geographic domain. By law accreditation is the model for quality assurance.

The primary assignment of NVAO is defined in the Treaty between the Dutch and Flemish Education ministers of 2003, which is described as:

The primary assignment of NVAO is to accredit existing programmes in higher education (accreditation) and to assess new programmes (initial accreditation) in the Netherlands and Flanders. NVAO can be requested to carry out additional tasks by the Ministers of higher education in both countries if these assignments support or supplement NVAO's primary assignment.

In the Netherlands, the first accreditation system was operational from 2003 to 2010, in Flanders from 2005 to 2012. So the Netherlands has already made the transition to the new system and it is expected that Flanders will follow in 2013 for programme accreditation, while implementing institutional reviews in 2015.

Until the end of 2010, the accreditation system both in the Netherlands and Flanders was based exclusively on (initial) **programme** accreditation. In Flanders, this system is still current, at least until the end of the academic year 2012 – 2013 (what will happen later depends on pending legislation). Since January 1st 2011, a new accreditation system based on **institutional** audit

combined with (initial) programme accreditation was introduced in the Netherlands.

iii. The main functions of NVAO, its current main areas of responsibility and work, including the review methods it uses

(Initial) programme accreditation

Programme assessment and accreditation is the core of both the accreditation system still in place in Flanders and the new system in the Netherlands.

The framework for assessments of existing programmes still in place in Flanders comprises six themes. The six themes are subdivided into 21 standards that are assessed on a four-point scale (excellent, good, satisfactory and unsatisfactory). For assessing at theme level a dichotomous scale is used (satisfactory or unsatisfactory), as is the case for the final assessment. A very similar assessment framework is applied for accreditation of new programmes. In case of negative decisions of existing programme accreditation a recovery period of maximum 3 years is possible.

In the new system in place in the Netherlands the final judgement of a programme is based on a four-point scale (Excellent, Good, Sufficient and Insufficient); this scale is applicable both on the level of a study programme and on the level of the separate standards of the framework. The number of standards depends on the framework applied (cf. below)

The new system for programme accreditation in the Netherlands contains a recovery period and an elaborated procedure for initial accreditation; if a new programme is approved, NVAO can restrict the duration of the initial accreditation and subject it to conditions that have to be met within one year. In case of accreditation the recovery period is limited to two years.

The new institutional audits in the Netherlands

The new institutional audits in the Netherlands concern the assessment of an institution's quality assurance system and ultimately lead to a judgment about whether an institution is in control of the quality of its education programmes.

These audits comprise five standards and can have three possible outcomes: satisfactory, conditionally satisfactory and unsatisfactory. A final conclusion that is either 'satisfactory' or 'conditionally satisfactory' means that the assessment of the programmes follows the framework of the so-called 'limited programme assessment'. This framework contains only three standards.

If an institution fails the institutional audit or if it does not want to participate in it for specific reasons (for example, the limited size of an institution), the programmes will be assessed on the basis of the framework of the so-called 'extensive programme assessment' which contains more standards than the framework of 'limited programme assessment' and strongly resembles the framework for programme assessment in place in the Netherlands before 2011 and still in place in Flanders.

The role of NVAO

NVAO performs all processes related to the institutional audits in the Netherlands and initial programme accreditation in both the Netherlands and Flanders. NVAO

also has the authority to make all the accreditation decisions for existing programmes, both in Flanders and in the Netherlands. Accreditation decisions on existing programmes are made upon quality assessments and reports from quality assurance agencies, some of which are also ENQA-members.

The role of NVAO, the division of labour between NVAO and the quality assurance agencies and the details of the review methods used are presented in various sections of chapter 4.

iv. NVAO's engagement with the ENQA membership provisions/ ESG

In its assessment frameworks, NVAO explicitly states that its standards have been developed in accordance with the ESG.

NVAO also has an active internationalization policy and real engagement regarding higher education and quality assurance promoting ENQA, ECA and ESG in many ways.

v. Methods employed by the Panel

The Panel was appointed in May 2012 and received the Self Evaluation Report (SER) of NVAO at the same time. The SER and its attachments were analysed by each of the Panel members before the site visit and the Panel discussed the individual findings during its preparatory meeting, the day before the site visit. The site visit took place on June 26th and 27th 2012 in the NVAO offices in The Hague. NVAO drew up the programme for the site visit in close cooperation with the chair and secretary of the Panel. The programme included interview sessions with 36 people, including the chairman and members of the NVAO Executive Board and General Board, the NVAO managing director and a number of staff members, representatives of the Advisory Council of NVAO, representatives of umbrella organisations of higher education institutions, representatives of student organisations, representatives of quality assurance agencies and representatives of Dutch and Flemish ministries of higher education. The management of NVAO informed the Panel that the external stakeholder interviewees were selected by the organisations they represent and that the NVAO staff interviewees were selected according to the criteria provided by the Panel. All those interviewed had read the SER and most stakeholders had been given the opportunity to comment on a draft version of it.

The SER contains valuable insights and statements. The Panel would, however, have appreciated to have been provided before the site visit with more factual, detailed evidence e.g. linking NVAO's standards and procedures more explicitly with the ESG.

The SER, its attachments and added documentation constituted the frame of reference for the interviews during the site visit, which in turn provided further oral evidence related to the written documentation.

The Panel appreciates the fact that a number of relevant documents, originally in Dutch, were provided in an English translation and also notes that the assessment and accreditation reports (to be found on NVAO's web site) and several additional documents provided during the site visit were available in Dutch only. In order to assess the content of specific reports available only in Dutch, these reports were read and described to the Panel by the sole Panel member who understands the language.

After the second day of the site visit, the Panel held an internal meeting where it agreed on the preliminary conclusions related to level of compliance of NVAO in relation to each of the standards in part 2 and 3 of the ESG. The secretary of the Panel then drafted the report in cooperation with the rest of the Panel. The draft report was submitted to NVAO for factual verification on August 27th, 2012 and with reference to ENQA standards NVAO was given two weeks to comment on the report. The final report was submitted to ENQA on September 28, 2012.

In relation to its conclusions, the Panel finds it important to note that it has assessed NVAO's level of compliance with the standards and also taken into account NVAO's practice in relation to some of the indicators listed in the guidelines. It has also provided a number of recommendations. It is the ambition of the Panel that this approach reflects the new policy for external reviews of agencies decided by the ENQA board which came into effect on July 1st, 2011. The policy states (among other things) that the enhancement aspect of the reviews shall be strengthened in the second round and the agency thus be given more recommendations for further development than in the first round of reviews.

The panel has decided to present its understanding of the main points of the standards and/or the guidelines in the subsections labeled "key elements" in chapter 4.

vi. The national (and international) context of the review

During the site visit, the interviewees mentioned several times that NVAO is in a "transition state" as models and procedures for quality assurance are currently being changed. It is the view of the Panel that a situation of change and development is to be expected for most quality assurance agencies. The Panel recognises that NVAO and its partners have work ahead in order to establish the institutional assessment approach in Flanders as well as to consolidate the new practice in the Netherlands. The Panel encourages all the parties to learn from the experience gathered thus far.

Acknowledgement

The Panel would like to thank formally all those that engaged in the process, including all stakeholders who were generous with their time, feedback and insights. The hospitable and open approach by the management and staff of NVAO was very much appreciated by the Panel.

4. Compliance with the ENQA membership criteria linked to the relevant European Standards and Guidelines (ESG)

4.1 ENQA criterion 1 - Activities (ESG 3.1, 3.3)

Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities (at institutional or programme level) on a regular basis. The external quality assurance of agencies should take into account the presence and effectiveness of the external quality assurance processes described in Part 2 of the European Standards and Guidelines. *The external quality assurance activities may involve evaluation, review, audit, assessment, accreditation or other similar activities and should be part of the core functions of the agency.*

Key elements

Concerning the key elements “quality assurance activities”, “a regular basis” and “core function” they are concrete and perceived in the same way by all. They are fully met by NVAO’s accreditation through the 6/8 year cycle and the fact that NVAO either conducts the quality assurance exercise itself and makes the accreditation decision (institutional audits in the “new” system in the Netherlands, initial programme assessments in both NL and FL) or makes decisions on the basis of the quality assessments performed by quality assurance agencies (assessments of existing programmes in both NL and FL).

The second paragraph: “... should take into account the presence and effectiveness of the external quality assurance processes described in Part 2 of the ESG” refers to ESG Part 2 (8 standards), which again refers to ESG Part 1 (7 standards), each standard having a variable number of guidelines.

Evidence and analysis

NVAO’s compliance with these standards was considered as fully met in the ENQA review of 2007. The Panel relied upon the assessment made in this first ENQA review of NVAO in relation to general characteristics that have not changed. Where relevant, the Panel has also taken into account the ENQA reviews of QANU, VLHORA and VLIR.

Reporting on the level of compliance by NVAO with the ESG Part 2 in the following section is structured in accordance with each of the standards 2.1 to 2.8: sections 4.1.1 to 4.1.8 below contain these assessments. NVAO’s level of compliance with ESG 3.1 is linked to compliance with ESG 2.1 – 2.8.

Recommendations

The recommendations of the Panel are presented at the end of each main section of chapter 4. The first set of recommendations is thus listed at the end of section 4.1

4.1.1 ESG 2.1 Use of internal quality assurance procedures

Standard

External quality assurance procedures should take into account the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines.

Key elements

“the effectiveness of internal quality assurance processes”, “described in Part 1”.

Evidence

Assessment of the HEI’s internal quality assurance is a major focus in the Dutch framework for institutional audits (standards 3, 4 and 5). Internal quality assurance processes are also incorporated as a separate theme (theme 5) in both the Flemish (initial) accreditation frameworks and in the Dutch framework for extensive (initial) programme accreditation.

Each of the quality aspects included in the standards contained in the Part 1 of the ESG are included in at least one of the frameworks for assessment. The frameworks are complementary to each other.

NVAO is responsible for all processes in relation to the new institutional audits in the Netherlands and the assessment of new programmes in both the Netherlands and Flanders. In both the Netherlands and in Flanders, NVAO is also responsible for accreditation decisions on existing programmes as well as for specifying frameworks for assessment to be applied by the quality assurance agencies and their panels. These frameworks are formulated by NVAO in consultation with, among others, these quality assurance agencies. In the process of assessing the reports related to assessments of existing programmes, NVAO checks according to the SER and interviews during the site visit whether the agencies truly adhere to the frameworks.

The conclusion reached in the reviews of QANU, VLHORA and VLIR are that these agencies fully comply with ESG 2.1

Analysis

Both the documentary and orally presented evidence are convincing.

Besides the frameworks for assessments of which the ones in use in the Netherlands contain explicit references to the ESG, the Panel has been provided with tables showing the relationship between the focus in each of the different forms of assessments and the ESG Part(s) 1 (and 2). During the site visit, both the executive board of NVAO and staff members stressed that the new Dutch system for external quality assurance has been developed specifically to be aligned with the ESG. It was confirmed that institutional audit examines the quality assurance within each HEI as a whole.

Indications for the effectiveness of the focus on internal quality assurance of HEIs is provided by the fact that representatives from the Dutch ministry expressed the view that one of the main achievements of the new system for external quality assurance in the Netherlands is that it contributes to the improvement of the internal quality assurance within institutions. The General

Board expressed the view that there is an increasing emphasis on development of a quality culture in all HEIs, and similarly the umbrella organisations of the HEIs in the Netherlands expressed the view that the institutional audits are useful in encouraging debate within institutions regarding the overall mission, strategic directions etc.

With respect to Flanders, the Panel considers that the fact that VLIR and VLHORA both have been accepted as full ENQA members is sufficient proof that they pay due attention to Part 1 of the ESG in their own processes and thus provides further support to the conclusion reached by the Panel.

Conclusion

NVAO fully complies with ESG 2.1.

4.1.2 ESG 2.2 Development of external quality assurance processes

Standard

The aims and objectives of quality assurance processes should be determined before the processes themselves are developed, by all those responsible (including higher education institutions) and should be published with a description of the procedures to be used.

Key elements

Developing aims and objectives of quality assurance processes involving stakeholders, “published with a description of the procedures to be used”, no unnecessary interference with normal work (the latter is from the guidelines).

Evidence

According to the SER presented by NVAO and confirmed by those interviewed during the site visit, both the frameworks still in use in Flanders and the new frameworks for accreditation and institutional audit in use in the Netherlands were designed in consultation with representatives of institutions, quality assurance agencies and other assessment experts. Moreover, the new frameworks used in the Netherlands were designed with reference to a thorough evaluation of the previous system, followed by various forms of discussions with external stakeholders and a subsequent pilot-test among a number of higher education institutions and study programmes in both the Netherlands and Flanders.

The frameworks were then discussed in parliament and after being decided upon they were published online on NVAO’s website well before the start of the implementation of the systems in both countries. The frameworks include a description of the procedures to be used. The frameworks for the Netherlands also contain a very short and general description of the aims and objectives of the processes, but a similar description is not part of the current Flemish frameworks. The aims and objectives of the processes in both the Netherlands and Flanders are described indirectly, but not specifically, in NVAO’s new Strategic Policy Statement, which has been published on NVAO’s website after the Panel’s visit.

According to both the SER and those interviewed during the site visit, an explicit ambition of the new system, and something NVAO has committed itself to

achieve, is that it should lead to a 25% reduction of the administrative burden involved in programme assessments. The idea is that this reduction is to be achieved by the way limited programme assessment and IA complement each other. Process oriented aspects that programmes have in common or which are organised at a higher level, such as facilities and systems of internal quality assurance, are (NL) or will be (FL) assessed once in the institutional audits and not repeated at programme level anymore.

Analysis

The impression of the Panel is that all relevant stakeholders, including HEIs, have indeed been involved in the development of the assessment frameworks. As noted in the external review of NVAO of 2007, the evaluation of the level of compliance in relation to this standard has to take into account the fact that accreditation in Flanders and The Netherlands is regulated by law. This implies that the global aims and objectives have been determined in a democratic process by legislation and that the frameworks have been approved by the respective ministers. In this process the impression from the SER and the interviews during the site visit is that the frameworks that were developed by NVAO do take into account comments made by the stakeholders.

The fact that the frameworks do not contain explicit statements of the aims and objectives of the assessment processes surprises the Panel and is a shortcoming, but since the aims and objectives are presented elsewhere (albeit not very publicly) and since all relevant stakeholders have been involved in the design of the processes, the Panel does not find this to be a critical issue in relation to the overall assessment of NVAO's level of compliance with ESG 2.2 in itself. However, NVAO has an improvement potential in presenting aims and objectives in basic introductory parts to each of their frameworks: What kind of effects (control and/or enhancement) are aimed for connected to each accreditation procedure. Such an element would also facilitate the understanding of the design of the processes (section 4.1.4)

In its SER, NVAO demonstrates that it is aware of the fact that it may take some time before the 25% reduction of administrative burden will be achieved as the implementation of the new frameworks implies that institutions and programmes have to get used to the new information files and self-evaluation reports. But by having set this ambition and committed itself to achieve it and play an active role in monitoring whether the aim will be achieved, the Panel is convinced that NVAO does what it can to ensure that the demands on institutions are no greater than what is necessary for the achievement of the objectives of the new system.

Conclusion

NVAO substantially complies with ESG 2.2.

4.1.3 ESG 2.3 Criteria for decisions

Standard

Any formal decisions made as a result of an external quality assurance activity should be based on explicit published criteria that are applied consistently.

Key elements

“formal decisions”, “explicit published criteria”, “applied consistently”.

By “formal decisions” the Panel understands this to refer to the accreditation decisions that are executed by NVAO on the basis of their own assessments (institutional audits in the Netherlands and initial programme assessments in the Netherlands and Flanders) and assessment reports produced by quality assurance agencies (assessments of existing programmes in the Netherlands and Flanders).

“Explicit published criteria” are understood as

1. criteria that underpin quality as the backbone of the assessments performed by the experts/peers
2. in the context of decision-making: criteria/procedural elements regulating the appointment and work of experts and also explaining the process from the presentation of an assessment report to the subsequent accreditation decision
3. criteria for judging consistency containing indicators for deciding on any threshold values in use and their consequences.

Evidence

The frameworks contain standards for the different types of quality assessments and accreditations.

The frameworks contain descriptions on the composition of Panels and on assessment processes. Regarding the use of threshold values (“scores”), the frameworks instruct the use of three or four levels dependent on the activity being undertaken. Chapter 8 in the assessment frameworks in the Netherlands gives examples illustrating the use of the assessment scales for programme assessments. Chapter 9 describes how the judgments of the Panel in relation to individual standards must affect the overall judgment of the programme in case of programme assessments and the overall judgment of the institution in case of an institutional audit.

Whereas the framework for the institutional audits in the Netherlands contains a description of the consequences of the different possible outcomes (a positive, a conditional positive and a negative judgment) of an audit (section 2.5), the corresponding sections in the frameworks for (initial) programme assessments in the Netherlands only present the different possible conclusions that NVAO can reach.

In its SER, NVAO states that it checks the quality of the assessment procedure and the quality of the programme by means of an analysis of the assessment report. If the report raises questions, NVAO requests additional information from the panels. Finally NVAO (the Executive Board) makes the accreditation decision. Concerning the process starting from the submission of an assessment report to an accreditation decision, the assessment frameworks for Flanders contain a description of the rules governing accreditation decisions (FL section 2.4.2). The Panel did not find evidence of a similar procedural description in the Dutch frameworks.

The SER states that NVAO has put in place several measures to ensure the consistency of the evaluation of assessment reports produced by panels, including:

- The use of detailed manuals for the evaluation of reports, which are updated on a regular basis.
- Frequent staff meetings where issues regarding the evaluation of assessment reports are discussed.
- Each application is evaluated by a policy advisor and a board member. If the evaluation necessitates this, the NVAO asks other staff members or board members for a second opinion. A final decision on an application is taken by all board members in a joint session on the basis of a detailed recommendation.

The representatives of the General Board of NVAO interviewed during the site visit further noted that the General Board looks at consistency of decisions made by the Executive Board.

Analysis

When NVAO underwent a similar review in 2007, the quality assurance activities and criteria were alike for the Netherlands and Flanders. Today, NVAO states that the regulations are still the same in Flanders as it was then. In 2007 the assessments at this point concluded with “fully compliant”. This Panel relies upon the conclusion made in 2007 concerning the Flemish situation since no change has been made yet. In the present assessment the Panel focused on the new Dutch system that was introduced in 2011.

Whereas the assessment frameworks for Flanders contain precise descriptions of the rules that NVAO’s formal accreditation decisions are based on, the assessment frameworks for the Netherlands do not contain similar descriptions. Since the assessments of existing programmes are executed by the Dutch quality assurance agencies and thus not by NVAO, the Panel finds it critical that it is not made clear how NVAO reaches its accreditation decisions. In other words, it was unclear to the Panel which criteria NVAO uses, if any, for deciding whether to follow or deviate from the conclusions reached by a quality assessment panel and how NVAO assures consistency in this respect. NVAO did not clarify this issue during discussions with the Panel during the site visit. It is important that NVAO respects the assessments made by the panel experts and that NVAO makes its considerations and ultimate accreditation decision in a manner and based on clear evidence that is completely transparent in all cases to all the involved parties.

In practice, however, the internal procedures/the mechanisms within NVAO appear to promote consistency in the decision making process and the site visit revealed no strong feelings on this matter.

Nevertheless, the Panel noted, during the site visit, a view that there is still a possibility for improvement regarding the consistency of accreditation judgments reached. NVAO also appears to be aware of the challenges regarding consistency as “the points of attention” raised in relation to ESG 2.3 in its SER are both concerned with the issue of consistent application of criteria. Furthermore, one of the 6 issues NVAO list as those it should pay attention to in the next years in order to improve its operation and the operation of the accreditation system in

the Netherlands and Flanders is: The large number of applications necessitates permanent attention to consistency in decision making, where criteria and mechanisms are closely connected.

Conclusion

NVAO partially complies with ESG 2.3.

4.1.4 ESG 2.4 Processes fit for purpose

Standard

All external quality assurance processes should be designed specifically to ensure their fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for them.

Key elements

This standard is in itself wide and abstract and therefore may be subject to many different interpretations. However, it is followed by quite extensive guidelines. In order to establish a common understanding of quality related to this standard, the Panel has included the guidelines as a starting point of its analysis:

“Quality assurance agencies within the EHEA undertake different external processes for different purposes and in different ways. It is of the first importance that agencies should operate procedures which are fit for their own defined and published purposes. Experience has shown, however, that there are some widely-used elements of external review processes which not only help to ensure their validity, reliability and usefulness, but also provide a basis for the European dimension to quality assurance.

Amongst these elements the following are particularly noteworthy:

- insistence that the experts undertaking the external quality assurance activity have appropriate skills and are competent to perform their task;
- the exercise of care in the selection of experts;
- the provision of appropriate briefing or training for experts;
- the use of international experts;
- participation of students;
- ensuring that the review procedures used are sufficient to provide adequate evidence to support the findings and conclusions reached;
- the use of the self-evaluation/site visit/draft report/published report/follow-up model of review;
- recognition of the importance of institutional improvement and enhancement policies as a fundamental element in the assurance of quality.”

In addition to the bullet points above, the Panel is concerned with the length of time that elapses from presenting the assessment report until an accreditation decision has been made. When time is unpredictable and/or running too long, it is a challenge for the involved parties to keep up an interest in the result and a motivation for action upon it. This is especially essential to support the aim of quality enhancement.

Evidence

The following subsections focus exclusively on the presence and characteristics of the elements of the processes that are listed in the guidelines to ESG 2.4.

Characteristics of the panels

The panels' required competencies are described for all activities in the various assessment frameworks.

NVAO appoints the panels for institutional audits (NL) and for initial programme assessment in both the Netherlands and Flanders. In terms of the assessment of existing programmes in the Netherlands, the panels are nominated by the HEIs, and the final composition is determined by the quality assurance agencies. Final approval of the composition of the panels is made by NVAO.

According to the representatives of the Dutch quality assurance agencies interviewed during the site visit, approximately 25% of the suggested panel members are queried by NVAO. In Flanders panels for the assessment of existing programmes are decided by the Flemish quality assurance agencies and approved by the Recognition committee, an independent external body that checks the independence of proposed members of review panels, before the assessment takes place.

All of the Dutch assessments frameworks include a section describing how the independence (both actual and perceived) of the panel members is secured and the requirements that the panels must meet. In all cases requirements with regards to the skills and competences of the panel members are specified. For all types of assessment in the Netherlands it is also (among other things) a requirement that the panels include a student and a member with international expertise. Requirements concerning the composition of panels are described in the Flemish accreditation decree and in the NVAO rules about quality assurance agencies and both VLIR and VLHORA have requirements about student participation and international expertise in their panels.

Training of panel members

Student members of the panels for initial programme assessments (both NL and FL) and potential chairs for the institutional audits in the Netherlands are trained by NVAO. The training for institutional audit lasts two days and includes, among other things, role play. Panel members participating in the assessments of existing programmes in the Netherlands and Flanders are instructed or trained by the quality assurance agencies, but NVAO offers a "Train the trainer module" for programme assessment.

For all types of the assessment panels in the Netherlands, those secretaries who are not panel members are trained by NVAO. When the site visit of NVAO took place approximately 200 secretaries had been trained. The training focuses on the assessment frameworks, how to use them, how to guide the panel members etc. Furthermore, secretaries participate in two reflection days per year at NVAO.

Provision of adequate evidence

The frameworks for assessments describe the review procedures in detail and include sections stressing the importance of providing adequate evidence to support the findings and conclusions reached.

Whether findings and conclusions are supported by adequate evidence is also the main focus when NVAO assesses the reports produced by the quality assurance agencies – and the main reason for sometimes asking for more information.

The use of self-evaluation/site visit/draft report/published report/follow-up model of review

Self-evaluation, site visit, draft report and published report all form parts of all the assessment processes in the Netherlands and Flanders. Follow-up is part of a process in the assessment of existing programmes if a recovery period has been granted. For initial programme assessments and for institutional audits, a follow-up review takes place only where positive decisions are made subject to conditions.

Recognition of the importance of institutional improvement and enhancement policies as a fundamental element in the assurance of quality

According to the SER, the new accreditation system in the the Netherlands heralds a new approach. The SER describes the new system as challenging the institutions to set higher targets for their programmes and their quality work in general and thus improving quality. Furthermore, it is stated in the SER that the new frameworks encourage the development of quality assurance and of a quality culture within the entire institution and that the new system allows for a more thorough discussion about systematic quality assurance and quality culture at institutional level and the quality of content and learning in individual programmes. Staff interviewed noted that reports are directed towards curriculum development and improvement.

Time from submission of report until decision has been made

Interviews revealed that the time from presentation of assessment report until decision has been made by NVAO is of varying length and, in some cases, exceeds one year. The interviewees not employed at NVAO did not know why the delay is so unpredictable. Some also expressed the opinion that, in some cases, conditions within the HEI had changed substantially between the time of the site visit and the receipt of the review report and that the decision and recommendations were no longer truly relevant. The interview with staff revealed that NVAO is challenged by the fact that most of the HEI's apply for accreditation at the same time of the year which means that there is a great imbalance over the year in the amount of applications that NVAO has to handle.

Analysis

The impression of the Panel from reading the SER and the assessment frameworks is that most processes are fit for purpose. This impression is further strengthened by the fact that none of those interviewed during the site visit questioned or criticised the processes, except for some overly long delays in delivery of the final report.

As the description above reveals, the processes include all elements listed in the guidelines to ESG 2.4. Interviews during the site visit gave the impression that the panels are considered to be competent and doing a good job. In the interview with the Dutch quality assurance agencies, the view was raised that for those secretaries who have already been trained by a quality assurance agency, the NVAO training may be felt as a waste of time; the quality of the training

provided by NVAO was also questioned, but this view was not raised in any other interviews.

Furthermore, the Panel has noted that in the reviews of VLIR and VLHORA the composition of the panels for the assessment of the Flemish programmes and the training of these panel members, as well as the assessment processes in Flanders in general, have been positively assessed and approved.

The issue of the delay to decision-making is not specifically addressed in ESG. The Panel considers this issue as being a part of its considerations of “fit for purpose”, which is illustrated by the information during interviews as given above. There is, however, no reason to believe that there are too many cases of unpredictable and inappropriate long timelines, but in the view of the panel the delays are still a critical issue.

Generally, the impression of the Panel is that the new system in the Netherlands and not least the inclusion of institutional audits and the possibility for granting a recovery period do indeed promote more focus on quality improvement and enhancement than the previous system did. This impression is supported by the SER which, based on an evaluation of the first institutional audits, concludes that the assessed institutions consider the audit a valuable learning experience that will positively affect the quality of the programmes they offer and causes staff to reflect more intensively on internal quality assurance at an institutional level. At the same time the Panel finds that the lack of focus on recommendations for improvement in the decision reports in case of positively accredited programmes in the Netherlands suggests that the focus on quality improvement and enhancement can still be further strengthened.

Conclusion

NVAO substantially complies with ESG 2.4.

4.1.5 ESG 2.5 Reporting

Standard

Reports should be published and should be written in a style which is clear and readily accessible to its intended readership. Any decisions, commendations or recommendations contained in reports should be easy for a reader to find.

Key elements

“Intended readership”, “readily accessible”

Evidence

As regards assessments of existing programmes, in Flanders, the institution applies for accreditation of a programme with NVAO, submitting the assessment report of the panel produced and published by the evaluating agency. In the Netherlands, the assessment report is published after completion of the accreditation procedure.

In both cases the reports have a summary, which NVAO can use to provide information to the public. NVAO requires the summary to be very concise in order to inform interested readers at a glance about the most relevant characteristics of the programme. In addition, every assessment report contains

a scoring table and a separate paragraph with recommendations. The staff interviewed during site visit stated that NVAO is the primary intended readership for the programme assessment reports, HEIs the second one and the general public the third one. The staff also stated that summaries have been introduced primarily for the benefit of students and external stakeholders.

The NVAO accreditation decision reports are based on the assessment reports and contain a summary of the findings and discussions contained in these reports (the summary and the scoring table are integral part of the decision document), followed by the formal decision of NVAO.

For all types of assessments, the reports and decision documents have a fixed and structured format with the purpose of increasing readability. In 2012, NVAO started an evaluation project to investigate how well the new reports respond to the needs of the intended readers.

Both NVAO's decisions and the panel assessment reports are made public on NVAO's website (www.nvao.net). The site is equipped with a search tool to find information about a specific programme or an institution. NVAO's website lists all programmes in the Netherlands and Flanders which were submitted for accreditation.

Analysis

The reports produced and published by the Flemish quality assurance agencies have generally been positively assessed in the external reviews of VLHORA and VLIR. In the case of VLHORA, some criticism was raised (in 2008) about the clarity with regard to the intended readership and the lack of a summary which led to an assessment of VLHORA as being "only" substantially compliant; a recommendation to include a summary in the report was made. Since the Flemish reports - like the new Dutch reports - now have to include a summary, but have not otherwise been affected by the introduction of the new system in the Netherlands, the Panel rests its assessment of the Flemish reports on the external reviews of VLIR and VLHORA, leaving aside only the issue regarding the summary.

Regarding the reports related to Dutch programmes, NVAO states in its SER that, with the introduction of the new system, NVAO agreed with the quality assurance agencies to improve the readability of the programme assessment reports. NVAO feels that the first results in the Netherlands are promising. NVAO expects that the main findings and conclusions of a report will be easier to read for students, employers and other involved groups.

More specifically, NVAO finds, according to its SER, that, as a result of the introduction of limited programme assessment and extended programme assessment, the first panel reports produced in the new format are more informative and transparent than previous reports.

During the site visit, the relevant external stakeholders were questioned about their view on the quality of the new Dutch reports. Both the representatives of the Dutch Ministry of Education, the Dutch umbrella organisations, the Dutch student organisation and the Advisory Board expressed a generally positive appreciation of the first reports and that the reports are good and have been

improved with the new system, but that there is still room for improvement (or a complete implementation of the new guidelines). The summaries were highlighted as a new and very positive element in the reports, not least in terms of making the reports more accessible to a wider audience including students. The main critique raised by the representatives mentioned above was that the intended readership of the reports is too narrow and (as a consequence) the reports are too technical to be easily read by the general public.

In the course of the review, the Panel has looked into and assessed a number of the reports that have been published after the introduction of the new system in The Netherlands. The conclusion in relation to the reports following the new institutional audits as well as the ones for the revised form of (initial) limited and extended assessments is that they faithfully follow the relevant assessment framework of NVAO and that the structure is more or less identical across assessments within the same framework. All include a summary and are structured to cover description, analysis (including relevant evidence), conclusions and some forms of recommendations. They also contain sufficient preliminary explanation to enable a lay reader to understand the purposes of the review, its form, and the criteria used in reaching conclusions. The criteria used in making decisions are not explained in the NVAO accreditation decision reports (Cf. section 4.1.3 for an assessment of this). The writing style is literary with a few other steps to enlightening major issues or main findings.

As for the accessibility the Panel finds that, despite the fact that the search facility of NVAO's web site makes it rather hard to find a specific assessment report, the assessment reports contain what NVAO needs to be able to reach an accreditation decision and thus fit the primary intended readership of the reports as defined by NVAO. Despite the introduction of a summary, the Panel is, however, not convinced about the general readability for other stakeholders and agrees with the external stakeholders who during the site visit characterised the reports as being too technical – and maybe also too verbose – to read for the general public, including (prospective) students. Thus the panel also agrees with the stakeholders that the intended readership of the reports defined by NVAO is too narrow.

Having said this, The Panel has positively noted that NVAO has recently started an evaluation project to investigate how well the new reports respond to the needs of the intended readers besides NVAO itself.

Conclusion

NVAO substantially complies with ESG 2.5.

4.1.6 ESG 2.6 Follow-up procedures

Standard

Quality assurance processes which contain recommendations for action or which require a subsequent action plan, should have a predetermined follow-up procedure which is implemented consistently.

Key elements

"recommendations for action", "a predetermined follow-up procedure"

"The objective is to ensure that areas identified for improvement are dealt with speedily and that further enhancement is encouraged." (Guideline)

Evidence

The programme assessment reports contain a scoring table and a chapter with recommendations. The institutional audit reports also contain a chapter with possible improvements/recommendations listed. When a conditional accreditation decision is reached in relation to an institutional audit or an initial programme assessment, a subsequent action plan is required. In case of the application of a recovery period in relation to an assessment of an existing programme, the institution is required to present a convincing recovery plan before the recovery period is granted.

NVAO states, in its SER, that a formal follow-up procedure is not included as an overall obligatory part of the accreditation system.

At the same time, the SER makes clear that a recovery period has been part of the programme accreditation system in Flanders since 2005 and is part of the new procedure for programme accreditation in the Netherlands. More importantly, it is stated that in the case of the application of a recovery period, the institution needs to present a convincing recovery plan before the recovery period is granted and that, at the end of the recovery period, the achieved improvements have to be assessed positively by an assessment panel before accreditation can be granted.

Similarly, NVAO now has the authority to take a conditionally positive decision in the procedures of initial programme accreditation and institutional audit. In the case of a conditional decision in the Netherlands, a NVAO panel must follow-up and assess whether the programme or the institution meets the conditions within the set conditional period.

In the case of an unconditionally positive decision, there is no follow-up about the extent to which the institution and/or the programme management implement the recommendations of the assessment panel. In these cases, the follow-up on these recommendations will be assessed in the subsequent accreditation procedure (after 6 to 8 years).

In the 6 to 8 year period between being subject to an accreditation procedure, the Panel learned from the site visit that more and more programmes and institutions voluntarily engage in some forms of other reviews and publish reports based on these.

Analysis

In its SER, NVAO states: *"An official follow-up procedure, as meant here in the ESG guideline, is not a part of the accreditation system either, but two measures introduce elements that provide equivalent functionality to a follow-up procedure ..."*

The panel finds that follow-up procedures have been strengthened in the Netherlands through the introduction of a recovery period similar to what has been in place in Flanders since 2005.

It is now only in the case of an unconditionally positive decision that a follow-up procedure is not applied. As ESG 2.6 states that quality assurance processes which contain recommendations for action or which require a subsequent action plan should have a predetermined follow-up procedure which is implemented consistently, and as unconditionally positive accreditation decisions do not contain recommendations or require a subsequent action plan the standards does not apply to this part of the quality assurance processes of NVAO. Therefore the view of the Panel is that NVAO's level of compliance with ESG 2.6 is adequate. Moreover the Panel is convinced that the objective of ESG 2.6, as expressed in the guidelines to the standard, "to ensure that areas identified for improvement are dealt with speedily and that further enhancement is encouraged" is fulfilled.

Conclusion

NVAO fully complies with ESG 2.6.

4.1.7 ESG 2.7 Periodic reviews

Standard

External quality assurance of institutions and/or programmes should be undertaken on a cyclical basis. The length of the cycle and the review procedures to be used should be clearly defined and published in advance.

Key elements

"Cyclical basis", "review procedures", "clearly defined", "published in advance"
From the guidelines: "demands on institutions should not be greater than are necessary"

Evidence

The accreditation period of programmes in the Netherlands is six years, in Flanders it is eight years. After an initial accreditation, reassessment of the programme and reaccreditation should be finalized within six years (in the Netherlands) and within the length of the programme and two years (in Flanders). These cycles are mandated by Dutch and Flemish legislation.

The Dutch HEI's are subject to an institutional audit every six years.

Analysis

The description above clearly reveals that external quality assurance in both the Netherlands and Flanders are undertaken on a cyclical basis and that the length of the cycle and the review procedures are clearly defined and published in advance.

Conclusion

NVAO fully complies with ESG 2.7.

4.1.8 ESG 2.8 System-wide analyses

Standard

Quality assurance agencies should produce from time to time summary reports describing and analysing the general findings of their reviews, evaluations, assessments etc.

Key elements

“from time to time”, “summary reports”, “describing and analysing general findings”

Evidence

In the previous review in 2007, NVAO was considered only partially compliant with ESG 2.8 and was advised to give more attention to the production of system-wide and comparative analyses.

In the past years, NVAO completed a number of comparative analyses within clusters or domains. The analyses are mentioned in the SER and are listed and described in the attachments to it. An evaluation of the former accreditation system and of the pilots undertaken in order to develop the new system are other examples of system-wide analyses mentioned in the SER, but these have not been included in the list in the attachments and at the time of the review it was therefore unclear to the Panel whether they resulted in any form of reports or what kind of results they produced.

In relation to the future, NVAO’s new strategic policy underlines the importance of comparative and system-wide analyses and, according to the SER, NVAO recruited a new staff member assigned to do quantitative and qualitative research to underpin the analyses and a number of different system-wide analyses have been planned.

Analysis

From reading the description and analysis of the last external review of NVAO which led to the conclusion that NVAO only partially complied with ESG 2.8 as well as the present SER and list of comparative analysis published by NVAO since 2007, the Panel finds that NVAO has substantially improved its practice in relation to ESG 2.8.

The Panel notes, however, that NVAO itself is relatively critical about its achievement so far. In its SER, it states that despite its substantial effort regarding comparative analyses, it did not have a clear policy on this issue in recent years. It is further stated that in the new Strategic Policy Statement (2012 - 2016) the NVAO task of system-wide and comparative analyses is emphasized and should result in a clear agenda on this topic for the coming years and “that NVAO has to work on implementing its new policy regarding system-wide and comparative analyses”. Finally it concludes that one of its points of attention is to implement a clear policy and activities regarding system-wide analyses through yearly planning.

Some of the stakeholder representatives interviewed during the site visit expressed the view that they would like NVAO to do more system-wide analysis. Issues such as internationalisation, student experience and comparative analysis

of how the quality assurance agencies in Flanders and the Netherlands work were mentioned in this regard. This may require NVAO to adopt a more cluster-based approach than is currently the case.

As the Panel is informed, the situation is different in Flanders and in the Netherlands: the Flemish agencies operate on clusters of similar programmes within all HEIs which the Panel believes facilitates system-wide comparisons, while in the Netherlands – despite cluster assessment of university programmes since 2003 the process is geared more towards assessments of single institutions or single programmes.

In its assessment of NVAO's level of compliance with ESG 2.8, the Panel has given the critical self-assessment contained in the SER of NVAO a high weighting.

Conclusion

NVAO substantially complies with ESG 2.8.

4.1.9 ESG 3.1 Use of external quality assurance procedures for higher education

Standard

The external quality assurance agencies should take into account the presence and effectiveness of the external quality assurance processes described in Part 2 of the European Standards and Guidelines.

Key elements

This standard is understood holistic in its full text, there are no key words as such in this formulation.

Evidence and analysis

In section 4.1.1 to 4.1.8 the Panel has assessed the NVAO's level of compliance with ESG 2.1 to 2.8 and thus with Part 2 of the European Standards and Guidelines. The outcome is that NVAO is considered fully compliant with ESG 2.1, 2.6 and 2.7, substantially compliant with ESG 2.2, 2.4, 2.5 and 2.8 and partially compliant with ESG 2.3.

Conclusion

Based on its assessment of NVAOs level of compliance with ESG 2.1 to 2.8, the Panel concludes that NVAO substantially complies with ESG 3.1

4.1.10 ESG 3.3 Activities

Standard

Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities (at institutional or programme level) on a regular basis.

Key elements

This standard is understood as holistic in its full text, there are no key words as such in this formulation.

Evidence

The tasks of NVAO are described in the Treaty. They are further stipulated in the Netherlands in the Dutch Act on higher education and research and can be summarized as the (initial) accreditation of programmes of institutions of higher education and the assessment of these institutions (Institutional audit). In Flanders, the Flemish Act of 4 April 2003 forms the legal basis for (initial) accreditation in higher education and stipulates that the responsibility for (initial) accreditation of programmes is assigned to NVAO. Since it was established in 2003, NVAO has processed nearly 5000 applications for accreditation.

NVAO can be requested to carry out additional tasks by the Ministers of higher education in both countries if these assignments support or supplement NVAO's primary assignment.

Analysis

The Panel finds that the description above as well as sections 4.1.1 to 4.1.8 clearly illustrates that NVAO undertakes external quality assurance activities on a regular basis.

Conclusion

NVAO fully complies with ESG 3.3.

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Conclusion ENQA criterion 1

Based on its assessment of NVAOs level of compliance with 3.1 (including ESG 2.1 to 2.8) and 3.3, the Panel concludes that NVAO substantially complies with the ENQA membership criterion 1/ESG 3.1 and 3.3

Recommendations

With reference to the evidence and analysis provided in section 4.1.1 to 4.1.10 the Panel recommends that NVAO:

- makes the link between the NVAO standards and ESG Part 1 more explicit in the assessment frameworks;
- refines the descriptions of the aims and objectives, ensures that they are prominent in the frameworks and show how the various elements of the frameworks contribute to the aims and objectives;
- formulates explicit and public criteria about how it reaches its accreditation decisions in relation to the programme assessments in all cases;
- establishes a clear procedure on how to handle cases where the conclusions in the assessment report are not accepted by NVAO;
- strengthens the predictability of the timeframe and efficiency of its decision-making process;
- further strengthens the focus on quality improvement and enhancement of the HEI's;
- clarifies a) the purpose of every kind of report, b) the readership and c) the needs of the various kinds of readers in order to enhance the readability;
- gives a high priority to: a) the identification of the interested parties for system-wide analyses and of their needs; b) the definition of a realistic

schedule of system-wide analyses; and c) the production of system-wide analyses corresponding to the needs which were identified.

4.2 ENQA criterion 2 / ESG 3.2: Official status

Standard

Agencies should be formally recognised by competent public authorities in the European Higher Education Area as agencies with responsibilities for external quality assurance and should have an established legal basis. They should comply with any requirements of the legislative jurisdictions within which they operate.

Key elements

This standard is understood holistically in its full text, there are no key words as such in this formulation.

Evidence

NVAO is the official, public and bi-national accreditation organization in higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders. Its structure and duties are described in a bi-national Treaty (2003) and in both national legislations. NVAO reports to the Dutch and Flemish Parliaments via their Ministers of (Higher) Education. NVAO's annual report is used for accountability purposes.

Analysis

From the description in the SER and the legal documents it refers to it is evident to the Panel that NVAO has an established legal basis and is formally recognised as required by ESG 3.2

Although the Panel did not explicitly ask about it during the site visit, the fact that no one raised any points which could suggest that NVAO does not comply with requirements of the legislative jurisdictions within which it operates leads the Panel to conclude that NVAO fully complies in this respect. The fact that all external stakeholders expressed a general satisfaction with the work of NVAO and that NVAO was considered fully compliant with ESG 3.2 in the 2007 review, supports this assessment.

Conclusion

NVAO fully complies with ENQA criterion 2 / ESG 3.2.

4.3 ENQA criterion 3 / ESG 3.4: Resources

Standard

Agencies should have adequate and proportional resources, both human and financial, to enable them to organise and run their external quality assurance process(es) in an effective and efficient manner, with appropriate provision for the development of their processes, procedures and staff.

Key elements

This standard is understood holistically in its full text, there are no explicit key words as such in this formulation. However, the operationalization of the standard: that is, what evidence should be presented and how it should be analysed by the Review Panel, is more of a question.

Evidence

NVAO has an annual budget of approximately € 6 million, which is financed jointly by the Netherlands (60%) and Flanders (40%). Each year, NVAO draws up a budget which is then decided upon by the Committee of Ministers and both Parliaments. In the Netherlands and Flanders, NVAO applies fixed rates by law. The rate for an application for initial accreditation is maximum € 15,000 in the Netherlands and € 5,000 in Flanders. For an application for accreditation the rate is € 750 in the Netherlands and € 500 in Flanders. In the case of additional tasks and assessment assignments abroad, NVAO charges cost-covering fees. NVAO has agreed with both ministries in the Netherlands and Flanders that additional tasks assigned by the ministries will be organized and budgeted on a project basis. NVAO informs the ministries in advance about the expected costs. The latter can decide whether to continue the project initiative or not.

Since 2005, NVAO is located in the Parkstraat in The Hague, near the city and the Dutch parliament and the Dutch ministry of education. Several meeting rooms for smaller and larger groups are available for the organisation of conferences, seminars and meetings. Presentation and IT-facilities are up-to-date. In November 2011, a new information system was introduced to optimize the work-flow.

The workforce of NVAO consists of 56 people (53FTEs): four executive Board members, one managing director, 30 policy advisors, one Dutch and one Flemish legal advisor (together 29FTEs) and 20 other (partly supporting) staff (19 FTEs). Four policy advisors are available for international assignments. The staff composition includes policy, legal and communication advisors and supporting staff (policy secretariat, finances and personnel, records department and general services).

All academic staff hold a master's degree, with three members holding a PhD degree. The acquired professional experience of NVAO's staff is varied. All board members and the director have a longer career in (higher) education in board or management positions. Most staff acquired substantial work experience in higher education as teacher, developer, manager, researcher, inspector for higher education, or policy advisor before being employed by NVAO. A small group of junior staff was recruited to fulfill a kind of traineeship before being fully employable in NVAO's work processes. NVAO has defined core competencies of its staff.

Each member of staff participates in a performance review once a year. On this occasion staff have the opportunity to ask for further training if they find it relevant.

Analysis

According to its SER, NVAO has been funded sufficiently by both governments for its primary tasks in recent years and has received appropriate additional funding for the additional tasks that were assigned to the organization. Despite the fact that NVAO, like all public organizations, is currently subject to budget cuts, NVAO states that these cuts have not affected its operations up to now. As the critical issue related to respecting deadlines does not appear to arise (primarily) from a lack of resources (cf. section 4.1.3) the impression of the Panel from the interviews during the site visit matches the self-assessment of NVAO.

In its SER, NVAO concludes that good facilities are available at its location and, having visited and used these, the Panel fully agrees with that.

The SER states that, over the years, NVAO has developed a good quality of staff with varied competences and work experiences. With reference to a recent benchmark study of staff development among five members of ENQA, including NVAO, it concludes that compared to similar members within the ENQA network, NVAO staff is on par. The positive assessment of the competences of staff was not questioned by any of those interviewed during the site visit. On the contrary, the representatives of the General Board, for example, expressed the belief that the quality of the staff of NVAO is one of the primary reasons for the credibility and respect with which NVAO is held in the community.

The impression from the Panel's interview with NVAO staff is that they are satisfied with the possibilities offered for further training or other forms of competence development activities. On the job training and a mentoring system were mentioned by staff as some of the important forms of activities, particularly for newer members of staff.

NVAO finds, in its SER, that further development of expertise of staff on specific themes in higher education should be improved and thus that it should invest in further development of specific, theme-oriented, higher education expertise of its staff. Although it may be a relevant priority for NVAO, the Panel does not in any way find that it is needed for the purpose of being fully compliant with ESG 3.4.

Conclusion

NVAO fully complies with ENQA criterion 3 / ESG 3.4.

4.4 ENQA criterion 4 / ESG 3.5: Mission statement

Standard

Agencies should have clear and explicit goals and objectives for their work, contained in a publicly available statement.

Key elements

“clear and explicit”, “publicly available” and from the Guidelines: “the division of labour with relevant stakeholders in higher education” “documentation to demonstrate how the statements are translated into a clear policy and a management plan”

Evidence

In the “Strategic Policy Statement NVAO 2012 – 2016”, NVAO has defined its mission as follows:

NVAO is the independent and authoritative accreditation organisation set up by the Flemish and Dutch governments, whose primary goal it is to provide an expert and objective judgement of the quality of higher education in Flanders and the Netherlands. NVAO does this with a constructive, critical attitude, respecting the autonomy of institutions and their primary responsibility for the quality of their education, and with an open eye for the growing international context. NVAO is open, clear and transparent towards society and all concerned, especially the institutions of higher education and the students.

At the time of the review the new Strategic Policy Statement was not published on the website of NVAO, but the mission statement was presented on the website.

The new Strategic Policy Statement includes a section describing the context of the work assigned to NVAO; the division of labour with relevant stakeholders in higher education is described. NVAO states that it considers institutions to be primarily responsible for quality assurance and quality improvement. NVAO is required to assure that programmes meet the required standards and to stimulate the quality debate, giving account of its procedures, disseminating ‘good practices’ and visiting institutions and their programmes.

In relation to this the mission statement lists the three main tasks of NVAO as being:

1. Assessing and assuring the quality of Dutch and Flemish higher education.
2. Promoting the quality of higher education by promoting a culture of quality, aimed at regular assessment and continuous quality increase.
3. Putting Dutch and Flemish sectors of higher education (institutions, programmes) on the map and strengthening their position by means of international cooperation.

The Strategic Policy Statement also includes sections that translate the mission (and values and positioning) into a number of strategic goals and a strategic agenda for NVAO for 2012 to 2016.

Analysis

It is evident from the description above that NVAO has clear and explicit goals and objectives for its work. The mission statement is published on NVAO's website.

A description of the cultural and historical context of the work of NVAO is included in the separate context section. The Strategic Policy Statement clearly demonstrates the translation of the mission statements into a clearly formulated policy and management plan. The division of labour with relevant stakeholders in higher education is also described in the statement. The list of the main tasks of NVAO as well as other parts of the statement make clear that external quality assurance processes are major activities of the agency. The assessment frameworks confirm that NVAO employs a systematic approach to achieving its goals and objectives.

Conclusion

NVAO fully complies with ENQA criterion 4 / ESG 3.5.

4.5 ENQA criterion 5 / ESG 3.6: Independence

Standard

Agencies should be independent to the extent both that they have autonomous responsibility for their operations and that the conclusions and recommendations made in their reports cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders.

Key elements

“Autonomy”, “independence”

The Panels finds this standard is thoroughly described in the following guidelines. An agency will need to demonstrate its independence through measures, such as:

- its operational independence from higher education institutions and governments is guaranteed in official documentation (e.g. instruments of governance or legislative acts);
- the definition and operation of its procedures and methods, the nomination and appointment of external experts and the determination of the outcomes of its quality assurance processes are undertaken autonomously and independently from governments, higher education institutions, and organs of political influence;
- while relevant stakeholders in higher education, particularly students/learners, are consulted in the course of quality assurance processes, the final outcomes of the quality assurance processes remain the responsibility of the agency.

Evidence

NVAO was granted the status of an autonomous administrative body with legal rights according to Dutch legislation. NVAO is accountable to the Committee of Ministers, which approves its budget, the annual report and the annual accounts. In accordance with the Treaty, the Committee of Ministers can only intervene in case of serious neglect by NVAO of its (initial) accreditation task, threatening the execution of that task. The Committee of Ministers can thus only intervene in the functioning of NVAO, but not in NVAO's decision-making. From the start of the accreditation system in the Netherlands and Flanders (2004, NL – 2005, FL) NVAO has been fully independent regarding decision making.

Members of NVAO's Executive and General Board are mandated for four years by the Committee of Ministers. They are appointed in a strictly personal capacity and not as representatives of any organisation.

In order to guarantee the independence of board and staff members, NVAO has ruled that members of both categories cannot participate in applications from institutions or programmes they have been associated with in any form during the previous five years. Members of the Board have to be completely independent in making decisions. If there is a specific application where this independence cannot be guaranteed, the member of the Board will withdraw from the decision-making process for the programme concerned.

The legally binding assessment frameworks formulated by NVAO in consultation with relevant stakeholders define the standards which the assessments have to

refer to, the possible judgements in relation to each of the standards and the general conclusion that they may result in and how this conclusion should be reached (assessment rules), requirement regarding the composition of panels, the assessment processes and the decision-making by NVAO. The assessment frameworks for (initial) programme assessments also include a list of the documents that the programmes need to provide and guidance as regards the “threshold levels” for the different possible judgement that can be reached by an assessment panel. Finally the assessment frameworks include a chapter in which NVAO outlines the rules laid down by implementing regulations regarding conditional decisions and granting of improvement periods.

Analysis

The view of NVAO expressed in its SER is that the official status offers NVAO a good formal structure to guarantee its independence and it states that its independence is recognised by different stakeholders. The interviews with stakeholders during the site visit confirmed this statement.

It is also evident to the Panel that NVAO has autonomous responsibility for its operations and its operational independence from higher education institutions and governments is guaranteed in official documents.

The very detailed and legally binding assessment frameworks (as well as the continuous monitoring of the level of adherence to them) ensure that the appointment of external experts and the determination of the outcomes of the quality assurance processes are undertaken autonomously and independently from governments, higher education institutions, and organs of political influence. They also ensure that the conclusions and recommendations made in the reports cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders and that the final outcomes of the quality assurance processes (the accreditation decisions) remain the sole responsibility of NVAO.

Since the assessments of existing programmes are not carried out by NVAO, the Panel finds that the independence of the quality assurance agencies carrying out these types of assessments needs to be considered as part of the assessment of the operational independence of NVAO. In this regard, the Panel has noted that in the external assessments of both VHLORA and VLIR these agencies have been assessed as being fully compliant and the Dutch agency QANU as being substantially compliant with ESG 3.6 Independence and so do not raise questions as regards the independence of the processes carried out by these agencies. The situation is less clear regarding the other Dutch quality assurance agencies which were not (yet) vetted by ENQA, but NVAO explicitly requires their panel members to adhere to a Code of Conduct and to sign an independence and confidentiality declaration.

Conclusion

NVAO fully complies with ENQA criterion 5 / ESG 3.6.

4.6 ENQA Criterion 6 / ESG 3.7 External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the members

Standard

The processes, criteria and procedures used by agencies should be pre-defined and publicly available.

These processes will normally be expected to include:

- a self-assessment or equivalent procedure by the subject of the quality assurance process;
- an external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate, (a) student member(s), and site visits as decided by the agency;
- publication of a report, including any decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes;
- a follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report.

Key elements

The standard is self-contained, with the guideline adding on the need to ensure professional management and consistency and an appeals procedure.

Evidence

The standards (criteria), processes and procedures used by NVAO and the quality assurance agencies in the Netherlands and Flanders are defined in the publicly available assessment frameworks.

All types of assessments include some form of self-assessment, an external assessment by a group of experts, including a student member, site visits and the publication of a report including the recommendations of the panel and (in a separate report) the decision by NVAO.

A follow-up procedure is applied in some cases, in others not. The issue of follow-up is thoroughly described, analysed and concluded upon in section 4.1.6 and will therefore not be repeated in this section and not influence the conclusion either.

For the programme assessments carried out by the quality assurance agencies NVAO checks, as described in section 4.1.3, the quality of the assessment procedure based on the information provided in the assessment report and if this report leaves questions unanswered, NVAO requests additional investigation.

To handle appeals NVAO has set up appeals commissions for the Netherlands and Flanders (competencies not given in the SER) that provides NVAO with advice on which NVAO can make a decision. NVAO is pleased with this set up although it reports further adjustments. If the decision on an internal appeal is negative, the institution can pass the appeal on to independent ministerial body in either the Netherlands or Flanders.

Analysis

The standards (criteria), processes and procedures used by NVAO and the quality assurance agencies in the Netherlands and Flanders are pre-defined and publicly

available and the processes all include the elements expected by standard 3.7 except a follow-up procedure which is not applied in all cases. Based on the numerous references to the assessment frameworks in the SER and not least in many of the interviews during the site visit, the Panel is convinced that NVAO and the quality assurance agencies pay careful attention to the declared principles of the different forms of assessment and that NVAO does its utmost to ensure both that the requirements and processes are managed professionally and that the conclusions and decisions are reached in a consistent manner. In relation to the issue of consistency the Panel wishes to point out what was mentioned in section 4.2.8 about clusters as clustering of assessments may also be beneficiary to consistency in assessments and decision making. Moreover, it is clear to the panel that NVAO is aware of the fact that as it is processing some 600 applications every year a constant attention to the consistency of the decision making is needed.

The Panel relies upon the description of the appeals procedures. An appeals commission is mainly there to secure the rights of an institution. The judgements of the appeals commission may of course also tell something about the quality assurance and professionalism of NVAO. However; the Panel is in line with ESG and regards the appeals procedure as a part of ESG 3.7 (even if it is only given in the guidelines and not in the standard itself).

Conclusion

NVAO fully complies with ENQA criterion 6 / ESG 3.7.

4.7 ENQA Criterion 7 / ESG 3.8: Accountability procedures

Standard

Agencies should have in place procedures for their own accountability.

These procedures are expected to include the following:

- i. A published policy for the assurance of the quality of the agency itself, made available on its website;
- ii. Documentation which demonstrates that:
 - the agency's processes and results reflect its mission and goals of quality assurance;
 - the agency has in place, and enforces, a no-conflict-of-interest mechanism in the work of its external experts;
 - the agency has reliable mechanisms that ensure the quality of any activities and material produced by subcontractors, if some or all of the elements in its quality assurance procedure are subcontracted to other parties;
 - the agency has in place internal quality assurance procedures which include an internal feedback mechanism (i.e. means to collect feedback from its own staff and council/board); an internal reflection mechanism (i.e. means to react to internal and external recommendations for improvement); and
 - an external feedback mechanism (i.e. means to collect feedback from experts and reviewed institutions for future development) in order to inform and underpin its own development and improvement.
- iii. A mandatory cyclical external review of the agency's activities at least once every five years which includes a report on its conformity with the membership criteria of ENQA.

Key elements

This standard is understood in its full text, there are no explicit key words as such in this very comprehensive formulation. However, the meaning of "subcontractor" is not made clear by ENQA. In various dictionaries a subcontractor is generally defined as an individual or in many cases a business that signs a contract to perform a part or all of the obligations of another's contract. In its decision making NVAO has to build upon quality assurance performed by other agencies as regulated by law. As far as the Panel sees it, ENQA's practise until now has not been to regards these as subcontractors, neither do we.

Evidence

- i. A published policy for the assurance of the quality of the agency itself, made available on its website

The "NVAO Quality Statement" of 2006 contains a section (section 4) presenting among other items NVAOs "policy" for its own internal quality assurance and the policy is also available on NVAO's website.

- ii. Documentation on specific issues

As described in section 4.1.4, all of the Dutch assessments frameworks include a section describing how the independence (both factual and perceived) and also how the "no-conflict of interest" of the panel members is secured. The

mechanisms comprise different kinds of documents that each of the panel members and the secretary must sign. The Flemish frameworks do not contain anything similar.

NVAO does not report that it uses subcontractors in the ordinary sense. Section 4.1 describes how NVAO ensures the quality of the activities and material produced by the cooperating quality assurance agencies. To supplement these descriptions, it can be mentioned here that NVAO in its SER describes that it gives feedback to the quality assurance agencies and secretaries concerning the quality of the reports they produced on a regular basis. At the interviews during the site visit, the quality assurance agencies in both the Netherlands and Flanders confirmed that NVAO provides formal and informal feedback to them.

The internal feedback and reflection mechanisms contain both written and verbal activities. In the SER, NVAO highlights the periodic meeting with the Advisory Council (three times a year), an extensive survey of the staff's satisfaction in 2011 and yearly staff meeting to discuss the realisations of previous objectives and plans and formulate the objectives of NVAO's internal quality assurance.

External feedback mechanisms comprises for instance regular meetings with the relevant ministerial representatives in the Netherlands and Flanders, the quality assurance agencies and different written evaluation of the procedures for initial accreditation

- iii. A mandatory cyclical external review of the agency's activities at least once every five years

The documents governing the work of NVAO do not contain any requirements concerning external reviews of NVAOs activities, but with the 2007 review and the present 2012 review NVAO has so far been subject to an external evaluation every five years.

Analysis

A published policy for the assurance of the quality of NVAO exists and is available on the website of NVAO.

The assessment frameworks for the Netherlands clearly reveal that NVAO has in place, and enforces, a no-conflict-of-interest mechanism in the work of the panels. The reviews of VLHORA and VLIR leaves the Panel convinced that a no-conflict-of-interest mechanism in the work of the panels is also in place and enforced in the assessments in Flanders.

The quality assurance of the work of the quality assurance agencies is convincing and so are the internal and external feedback mechanisms.

In general it is the impression from the SER and the site visit that NVAO has had a strong focus on developing its internal quality assurance since the external review in 2007 where critical points were raised. NVAO seems to have strengthened internal quality assurance, specifically the level of dialogue with stakeholders which was identified as a "weak" point in 2007, now seems to have developed and have become a "strong" point. During the site visit, a good

dialogue with stakeholders was repeatedly mentioned by external stakeholders as one of the characteristics of NVAO.

Conclusion

NVAO fully complies with ENQA criterion 7 / ESG 3.8.

4.8 ENQA criterion 8: Miscellaneous

- i. The Agency pays careful attention to its declared principles at all times, and ensures both that its requirements and processes are managed professionally and that its judgements are reached in a consistent manner, even if the judgements are formed by different groups.
- ii. If the Agency makes formal quality assurance decisions, or conclusions which have formal consequences, it should have an appeals procedure. The nature and form of the appeals procedure should be determined in the light of the constitution of the Agency.
- iii. The Agency is willing to contribute actively to the aims of ENQA.

Key elements

“consistent manner”, “appeals procedure”, “willing to contribute to the aims of ENQA”

By “willing to contribute to the aims of ENQA” the Review Panel has looked upon the following two dimensions:

1. Inwards: being a good role model by an active follow up of the recommendations given by the review panel in the previous review in 2007
2. Outwards: actively promoting ENQA/ESG on the European Arena for Higher Education

Evidence and analysis

Section 4.6 deals with the issues of “consistent manner” and “appeals procedures” and the analysis and conclusions related to these issues will not be repeated here but just form part of the frame of reference for the conclusion in relation to NVAOs level of compliance with ENQA membership criterion 8.

The recommendations from the review in 2007 (September) was presented in that report, chapter 1.5 Recommendations. Two years later, in a letter to the ENQA-board, dated December 21, 2009, NVAO gives their response to the recommendations that they consider relevant for the organisation. NVAO SER of April 2012 contains a chapter 9 “Overview of actions taken since the previous external review 2007”. Here NVAO deals both with recommendations regarding NVAO and recommendations regarding the system. Without going in details, it seems that NVAO has had a fairly good approach to this kind of follow up. The recommendation on developing the relationship between NVAO and the quality assessment agencies is dealt with on several occasions in the present report.

It is the Panel’s impression from the SER as well as its general knowledge about the international activities of NVAO, that NVAO has been actively engaged in the European arena and in that work actively contributed to the aims of ENQA. Just to mention: at present NVAO has an ENQA Board member, previously NVAO was the initiator for ECA, NVAO has been hosting several international conferences and a driving force behind international joint-projects. In short: NVAO is holding a high international profile.

Conclusion

NVAO fully complies with ENQA criterion 8.

5 Conclusion and recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

In the light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the Panel is satisfied that, in the performance of its quality assessment functions, NVAO is in compliance with the *ENQA Membership Regulations* and in substantial compliance with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. The Panel therefore recommends to the Board of ENQA that NVAO's Full Membership of ENQA be confirmed for a further period of five years.

The Panel concludes that NVAO fully complies with the ENQA membership criteria 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 and substantially complies with the ENQA membership criterion 1.

5.2 Recommendations

In relation to its assessment of NVAO's compliance with the ESG, the Panel recommends that NVAO:

- makes the link between the NVAO standards and ESG Part 1 more explicit in the assessment frameworks;
- refines the descriptions of the aims and objectives, ensures that they are prominent in the frameworks and shows how the various elements of the frameworks contribute to the aims and objectives;
- formulates explicit and public criteria about how it reaches its accreditation decisions in relation to the programme assessments in all cases;
- establishes a clear procedure on how to handle cases where the conclusions in the assessment report are not accepted by NVAO;
- strengthens the predictability of the timeframe and efficiency of its decision-making process;
- further strengthens the focus on quality improvement and enhancement of the HEI's;
- clarifies a) the purpose of every kind of report, b) the readership and c) the needs of the various kinds of readers in order to enhance the readability;
- gives a high priority to a) the identification of the interested parties for system-wide analyses and of their needs b) the definition of a realistic schedule of system-wide analyses and c) the production of system-wide analyses corresponding to the needs which were identified.

Annexes

A: Terms of Reference (ToR)



External review of the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)

Annex I: TERMS OF REFERENCE February 2012

1. Background and Context

NVAO independently ensures the quality of higher education by assessing the quality control of higher education institutions in the Netherlands and accrediting higher education programmes in Flanders and the Netherlands. In addition, NVAO encourages quality awareness within higher education institutions and advances higher education in its national and international context.

The organisation was established in 2005 by treaty between the Netherlands and Flanders as an independent quality assurance agency.

NVAO was reconfirmed Full membership of ENQA on 20 December 2007 as a result of a review coordinated at national level.

2. Purpose and Scope of the Evaluation

This is a type A review, as defined in the *Guidelines for external reviews of quality assurance agencies in the European Higher Education Area*. It will evaluate the way in which and to what extent NVAO fulfils the criteria for the ENQA membership and thus the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*. Consequently, the review will also provide information to the ENQA Board to aid its consideration of whether NVAO should be reconfirmed Full Member of ENQA. The review panel is not expected, however, to make any judgements as regards granting NVAO Full Membership in ENQA.

In addition to analysing NVAO compliance with the ENQA membership criteria, and thus with the ESG, the review aims to give a first external reflection on the new accreditation system in the Netherlands.

3. The Review Process

The process is designed in the light of the *Guidelines for external reviews of quality assurance agencies in the European Higher Education Area*.

The evaluation procedure consists of the following steps:

- Formulation of the Terms of Reference and protocol for the review;
- Nomination and appointment of the review panel;
- Self-evaluation by NVAO including the preparation of a self-evaluation report;
- A site visit by the review panel to NVAO;

- Preparation and completion of the final evaluation report by the review panel;
- Scrutiny of the final evaluation report by the Review Committee of the ENQA Board;
- Analysis of the scrutiny by the ENQA Board and their decision regarding ENQA membership;
- Follow-up of the panel's and/or ENQA Board's recommendations by the agency.

3.1 Nomination and appointment of the review team members

The review panel consists of five members: Four external reviewers (one or two quality assurance experts, representative(s) of higher education institutions, student member) and a review secretary. Three of the reviewers (including the review secretary) are nominated by the ENQA Board on the basis of proposals submitted to ENQA by the national agencies, and are drawn from senior serving members of Board/Council or staff of ENQA member agencies. The fourth external reviewer is drawn from a nomination provided by the European University Association (EUA). The nomination of the student member is asked from the European Students' Union (ESU). One of the panel members serves as the chair of the review.

Current members of the ENQA Board are not eligible to serve as reviewers.

ENQA will provide NVAO with the list of suggested experts with their respective curricula vitae to establish that there are no known conflicts of interest. The experts will have to sign a non-conflict of interest statement as regards the NVAO review.

3.2 Self-evaluation by NVAO, including the preparation of a self-evaluation report

NVAO is responsible for the execution and organisation of its own self-evaluation process and shall take into account the following guidance:

- Self-evaluation is organised as a project with a clearly defined schedule and includes all relevant internal and external stakeholders;
- The self-evaluation report is broken down by the topics of the evaluation: background description of the current situation of the Agency; analysis and appraisal of the current situation; proposals for improvement and measures already planned; a summary of perceived strengths and weaknesses;
- The report is well-structured, concise and comprehensively prepared. It clearly demonstrates the extent to which NVAO fulfils its tasks of external quality assurance and meets the criteria for the ENQA membership and thus the ESG. The report is submitted to the review panel a minimum of four weeks prior to the site visit.

3.3 A Site Visit by the Review Panel

NVAO will draw up a draft proposal of schedule of the site visit to be submitted to the review panel at least three months before the planned dates of the visit. The schedule includes an indicative timetable of the meetings and other exercises to be undertaken by the review panel during the site visit, the duration of which is 2 days. The approved schedule shall be given to NVAO at least two months before the dates of the visit, in order to properly organise the requested interviews.

The review panel will be assisted by NVAO in arriving to The Hague, Netherlands.

Where appropriate, the site visit will close with an oral presentation and discussion of the major issues of the evaluation between the review panel and NVAO.

3.4 Preparation and completion of the final evaluation report

On the basis of the review panel's findings, the review secretary will draft the report in consultation with the review panel. The report will take into account the purpose and scope of the evaluation as defined under article 2. It will also provide a clear rationale for its findings with regards to each ENQA membership criteria. A draft will be submitted for comment to NVAO within two months of the site visit for comment on factual accuracy. If NVAO chooses to provide a statement in reference to the draft report it will be submitted to the chair of the review panel within two weeks after the receipt of the draft report. Thereafter the review panel will take into account the statement by NVAO, finalise the document and submit it to NVAO and ENQA.

The report is to be finalised within three months of the site visit and will not exceed 40 pages in length.

4. Follow-up Process and Publication of the Report

NVAO will consider the expert panel's report and inform ENQA of its plans to implement any recommendations contained in the report. Subsequent to the discussion of the evaluation results and any planned implementation measures with ENQA, the review report and the follow-up plans agreed upon will be published on the NVAO website.

5. Budget

NVAO shall pay the following review related fees:

- Chair: 5,000 EUR
- Review secretary: 5,000 EUR
- Other panel members (3,000 EUR for each of the three panel members): 9,000 EUR
- Administrative overhead for ENQA Secretariat: 5,000 EUR
- Travel and subsistence expenses (approximate): 6,000 EUR

This gives a total indicative cost of 30,000 EUR for a review team of 5 members. In the case that the allowance for travel and subsistence expenses is exceeded, NVAO will cover any additional costs after the completion of the review. However, the ENQA Secretariat will endeavour to keep the travel and subsistence expenses in the limits of the planned budget, and will refund the difference to NVAO if the travel and subsistence expenses go under budget.

6. Indicative Schedule of the Review

The duration of the evaluation is scheduled to take about 10 months, from January 2012 to October 2012:

NVAO begins self-evaluation	October 2011
Agreement on terms of reference and protocol for review	January 2012
Appointment of review panel members	February 2012
Preparation of site visit schedule and indicative timetable	March 2012
NVAO self-evaluation completed	end April 2012
Briefing of review panel members	end May 2012
Review panel site visit	end June 2012
Draft of evaluation report to NVAO	August 2012
Statement of NVAO to review panel if necessary	August 2012
Submission of final report to NVAO and ENQA	September 2012
Consideration of the report by ENQA and response of NVAO	September 2012
Publication of report and implementation plan	October 2012

B: Members of the review Panel

Tove Blytt Holmen

Chair of the Panel

Director of Department of Quality Assurance, NOKUT (Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education)

Member of Advisory Council, PKA, Poland
Member of appeals and complaints committee of ENQA

2005 Audit for the Irish Agency HETAC, member of Expert Panel
2004 Institutional Accreditation and accreditation of Master in
 Hydrogeology, Chairing the Expert Panel commissioned by
 OAQ, Switzerland
2002 International Comparative Evaluation of BSc programmes in
 Agricultural Science. Commissioned by The Danish Evaluation
 Institute. Chair of Panel.

Signe Ploug Hansen

Secretary of the Panel

Director of Methodology and coordinator of IQA (internal quality assurance) at EVA (the Danish Evaluation Institute)

Member of the Advisory Board of the evaluation unit at Malmö Höghskola, Sweden.

2012 External review of the National Agency for Higher Education in
 Sweden. Panel member
2007-2011 Initiator of the ENQA Internal quality assurance group (the
 IQA group) and leading member of its steering group
2002 International Comparative Evaluation of BSc programmes in
 Agricultural Science. Secretary of the panel.

Julian Tobias Hiller

Student member of the Panel

Student of Mechanical Engineering at the Leibniz University of Hannover, Germany. Integrated Studies, now at a Masters level.

Member of the Accreditation Council of Germany
Member of the Board of the Agency for Quality Assurance Austria (AQ Austria)
Member of the Experts Pool for Quality Assurance of the European Students Union

2012 External Review of the Lithuanian Quality Assurance Agency
 SKVC, conducted by ENQA
2009 Training on the ESG by ESU and CoE in Strasbourg

2008 – 2010 Several Reviews (11) on Program level with several German QA Agencies

Elie Milgrom

Member of the Panel

Emeritus professor, now consultant in professional development of teaching staff (getting professors to know enough about learning and teaching in order to improve the quality of higher education).

1972-2006: professor of computing science and engineering at the Université Catholique de Louvain (Belgium)

2009-2012: member of an external review panel for VLIR: assessment of the informatics/computer science university programs in Flanders

2011-2012: member of an external review panel for AEQES: assessment of the informatics/computer science programs in the French-speaking part of Belgium

2011-2012: member of an AEQES working group in charge of proposing new criteria for quality assessment in the French-speaking part of Belgium.

2009: founding member of FA2L scrl (<http://www.FA2L.be>): a spin-off company of Université Catholique de Louvain

Norma Ryan

Member of the Panel

Director of the Quality Promotion Unit, National University of Ireland Cork - University College Cork, Ireland

- Member of the Irish Universities Association Quality Committee
- Member of the Irish Higher Education Quality Network
- Member of the Irish National Bologna Experts Team

2012: Representative of the EUA and Chair of the Steering Committee for the European Quality Assurance Forum

2008: External review of Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Ireland. Panel Member.

2010: External institutional review of Tallaght Institute of Technology, Ireland. Panel Member.

2011: external institutional review of American College Dublin, Ireland. Panel Member.

2011: Review of Academic Programmes, KTH, Stockholm, Sweden: external reviewer

2011: Institutional review of St Augustine Catholic University, Tanzania. Panel Secretary

2011: Institutional review of Weill Bugando Medical College, Mwanza, Tanzania. Panel Secretary

C: Documents considered during the review

(Listed in order of importance for the assessment)

- Self-evaluation report NVAO 2012
- Self-evaluation report NVAO 2012 – Attachments
- Report of the committee for the review of the Accreditation Organization of The Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) (September 2007)
- The Dutch website of NVAO: <http://www.nvao.net/>
- The English website of NVAO: <http://www.nvao.net/>
- Letter from the Chairman of NVAO to the president of ENQA about The follow-up of NVAO on recommendations included in the external review review of NVAO 2007 (December 21 2009)
- The NVAO Quality Statement of 2006 (handed out at site visit)
- Diagram illustrating the different forms of assessments within the new accreditation system in the Netherlands and the relations between these forms (handed out at site visit)
- Tables containing comparisons between the accreditation framework in Flanders and the Netherlands and the ESG (handed out at site visit)
- Report of the External Review of the Flemish Council of University Colleges (VLHORA) (October 2008)
- Report of the committee of the review of The VLIR Quality Assurance Unit (May 2009)
- External review of the agency Quality Assurance of Universities in the Netherlands (QANU) (October 2010)

Self- evaluation report NVAO 2012

April 16th 2012

Self-
evaluation
report
NVAO 2012

April 16th 2012

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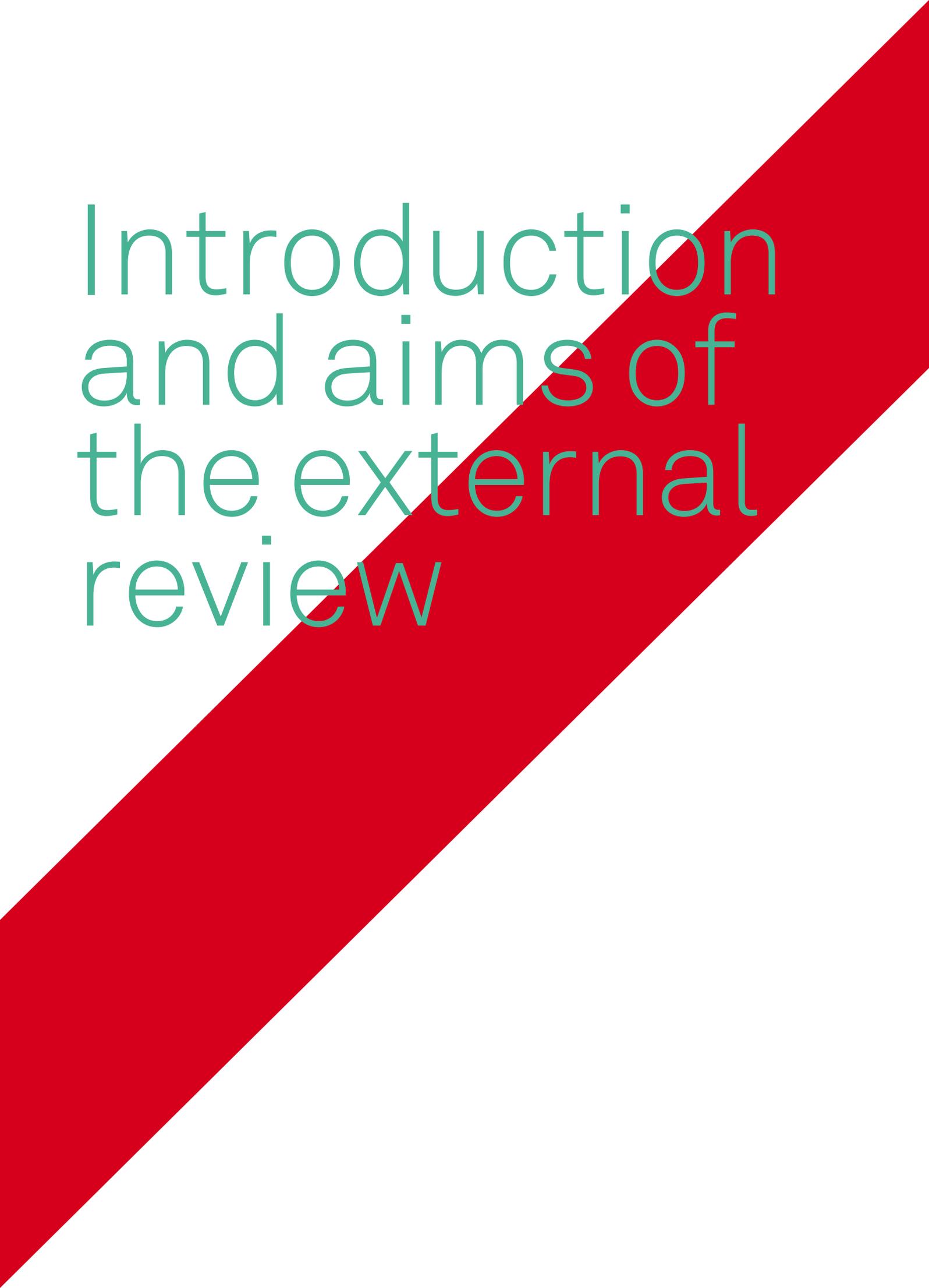
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Attachments



Introduction and aims of the external review

NVAO, the Accreditation Organisation for the Netherlands and Flanders [*Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatie-organisatie*] was formally established by the Dutch and Flemish governments as a binational organisation on 1 February 2005. The Netherlands and Flanders decided to found a binational organisation to express the cross-border cooperation on external quality assurance in the spirit of the Bologna Declaration. In this regard it is a significant advantage that the Netherlands and Flanders share the Dutch language.

The main objectives of the review scheduled for 2012 are:

1. Renewal of NVAO's full membership of ENQA, by establishing the agency's compliance with the European Standard and Guidelines 2009 (ESG), parts II and III, including the terms of reference of ENQA (review A), as well as the agency's compliance with the equivalent ESG requirements of EQAR, leading to the extension of NVAO's EQAR-registration.
2. A first reflection on the new accreditation system in the Netherlands that came into force on 1 January 2011, which constitutes an additional request of NVAO to ENQA and the review committee;
3. To contribute to NVAO's internal quality monitoring with regards to its organisation and its operation.

Accordingly, NVAO evaluates itself in this self-evaluation report from three angles: 1. with reference to the ESG, 2. from the point of view of introduction of the new accreditation system in the Netherlands and, 3. with regards to its functioning organisation. This three-sided evaluation is distributed among the chapters of the report in the following manner:

- > Chapter 1 (partly), 3, 4 and 5 (partly) deal mainly with compliance with ESG, respectively Parts 2 and 3;
- > Chapter 7 deals primarily with the new accreditation system in the Netherlands;
- > Chapter 1 and 5 describe and evaluate NVAO and its role in the new accreditation system.

The remaining chapters 2, 8 and 9 describe the systems of higher education in Netherlands and Flanders and summarise NVAO's activities, referring to the more evaluating chapters mentioned above.

The following introductory remarks are meant to put the three main objectives of this self-evaluation report in perspective:

1. NVAO is subject to a five-yearly external review in order to renew its full membership of the European Association for

Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). In 2007, NVAO successfully passed a first review of ENQA and became full ENQA-member. The present review of 2012 is the second of its kind. The previous review was initiated on a binational request by the ministers of Education in Flanders and the Netherlands. Since November 2008, NVAO has been registered in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), the register for quality assurance agencies (QAAs) that review institutions or programmes in higher education on a regular basis and substantially comply with the ESG.

2. The previous review in 2007 had as secondary objectives the evaluation of the – then- new accreditation systems in the Netherlands and Flanders and an assessment of their differences. Because the new system in the Netherlands has only been active from 2010 onwards, the present review only entails a first reflection of the new regime. Notwithstanding the different objectives and conditions of the two reviews, chapter 9 shortly reports the measures taken in response to the recommendations in the 2007 review.
3. Internal quality assurance is an important issue in NVAO's day to day operation, which consists of processing some 600 applications every year. This task calls for constant attention to the consistency of the decision making and continuous improvement of processes. NVAO sees the external review as an extra incentive for its own quality assurance and for the improvement of its internal and external operational processes.

NVAO is a binational institution. The differences between the Dutch and Flemish systems in higher education and external quality assurance are relatively small, but nevertheless considerable in a few aspects. This self-evaluation report was written from the perspective of the many similarities between the systems of higher education and accreditation in both countries. Only when necessary for a proper understanding, it refers to the differences between these systems. One important difference regards the timetable for the renewal of the accreditation regimes: while the new system has been in force in the Netherlands since 1 January 2011 and is being further optimized at the present moment, the new accreditation system in Flanders is in its final design stage and will be in force from the academic year 2013-2014.

In setting up its internal quality insurance system, NVAO identified its most important internal and external stakeholders and organised regular consultations with them, individually, or through umbrella organisations. An inventory of the results of these consultations was drafted during the preparation of this self-evaluation report, and is included in the document. The NVAO also consulted various stakeholder groups on different occasions on the present report. Eventually, the report was approved by the General Board of the NVAO on 16 April 2012.

Chapter

1

Summary

and general

appraisal

On 1 February 2012 NVAO officially existed seven years. Since its foundation NVAO has carried out the primary assignment as defined in the Treaty between the Dutch and Flemish Education ministers of 2003, which is described as:

The primary assignment of NVAO is to accredit existing programmes in higher education (accreditation) and to assess new programmes (initial accreditation) in the Netherlands and Flanders. NVAO can be requested to carry out additional tasks by the Ministers of higher education in both countries if these assignments support or supplement NVAO's primary assignment. Secondly NVAO is assigned to play an important role in internationalisation.

In extension of this primary assignment NVAO formulated its first mission and strategy in 2006 and renewed it in 2012. Since 2005 NVAO has completed a large number of applications for (initial) accreditation in the Netherlands (NL) and Flanders (FL), parallel to a substantial international task in Europe and world-wide. Several additional tasks in the Netherlands and Flanders have also been taken up. Up to 1 January 2012 NVAO decided (or in some cases advised) on more than 4.000 applications of all kind.

The questions this review sets out to answer are:

- › whether NVAO, with this substantial effort, successfully carried out its primary assignment and;
- › whether NVAO operates effectively with regard to its main stakeholders, being both governments, the institutions in higher education and the students in higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders.

For this purpose NVAO's Strategic Policy Statement emphasizes the importance of:

- › both robust quality assurance and quality enhancement based on expert and objective judgements;
- › the further development of a quality culture in higher education and;
- › reinforcement of the Dutch-Flemish cooperation, as well as cooperation in the European higher education area.

What is the current position of NVAO regarding these objectives and challenges?

In the past years NVAO has built a strong and respected position in higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders and Europe.

- › NVAO plays a leading, independent and critical role in quality assurance in higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders and was the initiator of the development of the new accreditation system in the Netherlands and Flanders;

- › NVAO proved to be a very flexible organisation capable of completing a large number of additional tasks on request of the Ministers of Education in the Netherlands and Flanders;
- › NVAO communicates and cooperates with its main stakeholders in an open and transparent manner, with the aim of contributing in the best possible way to the further development of a quality culture in higher education and thus to the quality of higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders;
- › Internationally, NVAO contributes considerably in Europe through ENQA, ECA, EQAF and European projects, as well as worldwide, through its involvement in INQAAHE.

Besides these achieved results there are several issues NVAO should pay attention to in the next years to improve its operation and the operation of the accreditation system in the Netherlands and Flanders.

- › The administrative burden of the accreditation system should be reduced by focusing on the essence of quality on institutional and study programme level;
- › The large number of applications necessitates permanent attention to consistency in decision making;
- › Additional tasks should be planned better and formal deadlines should be kept more rigorously;
- › NVAO should remain self-critical and self-reflective with regards to (systems of) quality assurance and its own functioning, by staying first and foremost focused on quality and its enhancement;
- › The binational nature of NVAO should contribute stronger to Dutch-Flemish cooperation in higher education;
- › International projects and activities should be more beneficial for institutions in higher education and/or NVAO as a whole.

According to its own assessment, NVAO fully complies with the ESG of ENQA, even if there are several issues that require its permanent attention. A major challenge for NVAO is the successful implementation of the new accreditation systems in the Netherlands and Flanders and to make these systems converge as much as possible. A first evaluation of the new system by the review committee is a very useful step in this process.

Another permanent issue is the consistency of NVAO's internal processes. In the past years NVAO focused in its internal quality assurance on a more effective steering of the quality of its internal processes. The present external review by ENQA will also be used to improve NVAO's processes.

Chapter 2 The accreditation systems in the Netherlands and Flanders



This self-evaluation report refers to the years 2007-2011, a period which is characterised by considerable changes in the accreditation systems used in Flanders and the Netherlands. A brief overview of these systems is given here to offer the reader a framework for the next two chapters, which describe how NVAO meets the European Standards and Guidelines within the accreditation systems of the Netherlands and Flanders.

2.1 / The 'old system'

In the Netherlands, the first accreditation system was operational from 2003 to 2010, in Flanders from 2005 to 2012. So the Netherlands has already made the transition to the new system, and Flanders will follow in 2013. To avoid any ambiguity, the current Flemish system will already be referred to in the past tense, although it is still operational in 2012.

The previous system was layered: NVAO had to base its accreditation decisions on assessment reports compiled by quality assurance agencies. In the Netherlands these were free-market agencies, known as VBIs, which had to be assessed annually by NVAO and when appraised positively, were entered on a public list. Higher education institutions were then free to use their services. In Flanders, on the other hand, the umbrellas of universities (VLIR) and university colleges (VLHORA) were designated by law to act as quality assurance agencies. In Flanders programmes had to be assessed in clusters, in the Netherlands there was no such requirement and universities of applied sciences and private institutions therefore chose not to do so; the universities, however, did.

The VBIs and quality assurance agencies were authorised to compose panels (following rough guidelines set by NVAO) and followed the accreditation framework as defined by law. The framework comprised six themes:

- > the programme's objectives
- > curriculum
- > staff
- > facilities
- > internal quality assurance
- > results.

These six themes were subdivided into 21 standards that were assessed on a four-point scale (satisfactory, unsatisfactory, good and excellent). For assessing at theme level a dichotomous scale was used (satisfactory or unsatisfactory), as was the case for the final assessment. So NVAO could not grant any conditional accreditations. In Flanders, in the event the final conclusion reached was 'unsatisfactory', a recovery period could be granted by the Flemish Government whereas in the Netherlands the recovery option was a theoretic possibility, which in practice, however, turned out not to be a realistic one.

For new programmes, the panels were composed by NVAO (with some exceptions in the Netherlands). Virtually the same assessment framework was applied, with the exception, of course, for the theme results, which was replaced with that of 'conditions for (financial) continuity'.

2.2 / The evaluation of the 'old system'

In Flanders and the Netherlands a great deal of attention has been paid to the functioning of the accreditation system. Based in part on evaluations and discussions with stakeholders, NVAO carried out a self-evaluation in 2008 to prepare the ground for the design of a new system, for which the preparations started that year. Positive elements of the previous system were:

- > the accreditation system was introduced smoothly and was fit for purpose: all programmes were assessed as planned during the first phase of the system;
- > the system has laid a quality foundation for the sectors of higher education in Flanders and the Netherlands. To put it bluntly: all the wrecks have been taken off the road;
- > the attention for quality assurance has strongly increased;
- > internationally, the system is understood and seen as a solid one.

These positive points are offset by the following negative ones that emerged from the evaluation:

- > the fear for negative assessments (and subsequent loss of prestige or closure of a programme) has led to programmes and panels giving and asking (too) much information;
- > the focus has been too much on procedures and processes, and too little on the content of the programmes and the achieved learning outcomes;
- > teaching staff had difficulty seeing themselves as part of the system;
- > the large amount of available public information (assessment reports, accreditation decisions) has paradoxically led to 'an inaccessibility of information';
- > In the Netherlands, in the absence of an obligation to assess in clusters, the comparative quality of the assessments has decreased.

This analysis was broadly shared by and with stakeholders and resulted in Flemish and Dutch ministers, in charge of higher education, commissioning the design of a new system that was to largely meet the points of criticism as described above. The ministers put great emphasis on a necessary reduction of the bureaucratic burden, without any concessions being made to the international legitimacy of the system.

2.3 / The 'new system'

In the new system, which was introduced in the Netherlands on 1 January 2011 and in the design that is currently being discussed in Flanders and which is expected to make it through the Flemish parliament before the summer, programme accreditation remains at the heart of the system. In both countries, however, an institutional audit is added to the system with a view to realising an important administrative saving at programme level. The institutional audit concerns the assessment of the institution's quality assurance system and ultimately leads to a judgement on the question whether an institution is in control of the quality of its education. In the Netherlands, the outcome of the audits will have immediate consequences, whereas Flanders regards the audits, which will be carried out in 2015 and 2016, as a baseline measurement that is obligatory for all institutions. In the Netherlands the audit comprises five standards:

- > vision of the institution regarding the desired quality of its education;
- > the policy developed and the means used to realise this vision;
- > a management information system;
- > improvement capacity and measures;
- > structure and culture of the organisation and its decision-making process.

In Flanders, the discussion about the content of the institutional audits is still ongoing, but both systems will broadly use the same standards. The wide Flemish scope of the institutional review, ranging from the institution's policy to internal quality assurance by focusing on the quality of education, can also be found in the first Dutch institutional reports.

In both systems the audits can have three possible outcomes: satisfactory, conditionally satisfactory and unsatisfactory. In the Netherlands, a final conclusion that is either 'satisfactory' or 'conditionally satisfactory' means that the assessment of the programmes follows the framework of the so-called 'limited programme assessment'. This framework, which in Flanders will be applied to all programme assessments, has only three standards:

- > the programme's objectives and qualifications;
- > learning content and learning environment;
- > assessment procedures, examination and achieved learning outcomes.

If an institution in the Netherlands fails the institutional audit or if it does not want to participate in it for motivating reasons (for example, the limited size of an institution), the programmes will be assessed on the basis of the framework of the 'extensive programme assessment'. This framework strongly resembles the 'old framework' as described above. In Flanders, the institutional audit will be made obligatory for all official institutions anyway, so that the programme assessment will always be a limited one. For non-official institutions, the standard of institutional internal quality assurance will be added to the programme assessment.

A number of changes have been made to the new system in response to a number of negative experiences with the previous one:

- > NVAO is involved in the composition of the panels beforehand by means of explicit approval (the Netherlands) or advice (Flanders);
- > the Netherlands, too, now has an effective recovery period;
- > the standards of the programme assessments are judged on a four-point scale; in the Netherlands, this is also the case for the panel's final conclusion regarding the overall quality of the programme. In Flanders, the discussion on this matter is still ongoing;
- > the number of documents that programmes are required to make available has been reduced considerably;
- > the reports have to contain a public-friendly summary, which NVAO can use to provide information to the public;
- > the secretaries of the programme panels will receive training;
- > in the Netherlands, assessments in clusters will become obligatory as of 2013.

The experiences with the new system are, of course, still limited. Chapter 7 of this SER contains a first and provisional evaluation of the functioning of the new Dutch system.

Chapter

3

Analysis of
Standards

and

Guidelines

part 2

The review panel is requested to assess on the basis of the following chapters whether and to what extent NVAO complies with the ESG. The assessment concerns NVAO's compliance regarding the individual standards and guidelines of ESG, as well as an overall judgement.

3.1 / Use of internal quality assurance procedures

External quality assurance procedures should take into account the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines.

Facts and findings

The accreditation system in the Netherlands is a combination of an institutional audit (IA) and programme accreditation (PA), based on limited (LPA) or extended programme assessment (EPA). The current system in Flanders consists of programme accreditation, based on extended programme assessment, but a new accreditation system, containing both IA and LPA, is under construction and will be implemented in the academic year 2013/2014. An extended description of (the evolution of) the Dutch and Flemish accreditation system is included in chapter 7.

Part 1 of the ESG refers to the following procedures in the institutions for higher education:

- (1) Policy and procedures for quality assurance
- (2) Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards
- (3) Assessment of students
- (4) Quality assurance of teaching staff
- (5) Learning resources and student support
- (6) Information systems
- (7) Public information.

All these quality aspects are included in the NVAO frameworks at institutional and/or programme level. Table 1 shows which standards of the frameworks cover these respective aspects. The frameworks LPA and IA complement each other, which is described in chapter 2 and will be explained further in chapter 7. As the standards of the former Dutch accreditation framework are almost similar to those of the present EPA-NL, and as the standards in the present Flemish framework are still those at programme level, columns IV and V also cover the standards used in the period 2004-2010 – the first phase^{5>} of the accreditation system in the Netherlands.

A major building block of the new accreditation system is the way LPA and IA complement each other. Process oriented aspects that programmes have in common or are organised at a higher level, such as facilities and systems of internal quality assurance, are (NL) or will be (FL) assessed once in the institutional audits and not anymore repeatedly at programme level. This should lead to a 25% reduction of the administrative burden involved in programme assessments.

Table 1

I	II Framework IA – NL ^{1>}	III Framework LPA - NL ^{2>}	IV Framework EPA - NL ^{3>}	V Framework – PA - FL ^{4>}
> Policy and procedures for quality assurance	Standard 4	-	13, 14 and 15	5
> Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards	4	2	13, 14 and 15	5
> Assessment of students	-	2	16	2, Assessment and testing
> Quality assurance of teaching staff	2	2	8	3, Quality of Staff
> Learning resources and student support	2	2	11 and 12	4
> Information systems	2	-	12	4
> Public information	2	-	12	4

1> Framework Institutional Audit (IA) – the Netherlands, attachment 11.

2> Framework Limited Assessment of Programmes (LPA) – the Netherlands, attachment 11.

3> Framework Extended Assessment of Programmes (EPA) – the Netherlands, attachment 11.

4> Framework Programme Accreditation (PA) – Flanders, attachment 11.

5> The initial phase spans six years in the Netherlands and eight years in Flanders, during which all programmes will go through an assessment under the new system.

Self-evaluation

The NVAO frameworks cover all mentioned aspects of internal quality assurance of institutions in higher education. The new frameworks encourage the development of quality assurance and of a quality culture within the entire institution. The IA framework focuses on the internal quality assurance (IQA) processes at institutional level and the processes related to individual programmes offered by the institution. The LPA framework focuses on the quality of the content and the achieved learning outcomes of the programme. Whereas the previous frameworks employed a more technical approach, the new system allows for a more thorough discussion about systematic quality assurance and quality culture at institutional level and the quality of content and learning in individual programmes. Most higher education institutions in the Netherlands applied for IA in 2011 and thus will be able to benefit from the reduction in administrative burden in LPAs in the coming years. Results from the first IA's indicate that the new framework encourages the development of quality assurance at an institutional level. However, smaller institutions are not likely to benefit from the IA and will therefore continue to operate under the regime of the EPA. In Flanders, LPA and IA will be compulsory elements in the new accreditation system for all institutions. EPA will not be applied any longer.

Judgement

NVAO complies with the standard.

Point(s) of attention

> The procedure for the IA consists of an overall assessment of the procedures within an institution, combined with several audit trails. These audit trails monitor the way institutional measures and regulations are perceived and acted upon at programme level (top down) and how the institutional IQA system operates in case of concrete quality problems (bottom up). The first accomplished audits show encouraging results in this respect: institutions realise that they can only benefit from the new system when their internal systems are coherent and interactive at both levels. NVAO should monitor whether this interaction is demonstrated convincingly in the IA.

3.2 / Development of external quality assurance processes

The aims and objectives of quality assurance processes should be determined before the processes themselves are developed, by all those responsible (including higher education institutions) and should be published with a description of the procedures to be used

Facts and findings

Both the previous and the current frameworks were designed in consultation with representatives of institutions and programmes, quality assurance agencies and other assessment experts. The aims and objectives of the systems were discussed with stakeholder groups and the frameworks were tested before the system came into force. The description of the drafting of the current frameworks in 2008 and 2009 in chapter 7 outlines this process. The frameworks were discussed in parliament and are published by the government and NVAO. Additional information on the procedures is provided in guidelines. The frameworks were made available online on NVAO's website well before the start of the systems in both countries (www.nvao.net).

The stakeholders and NVAO refrained from drawing up overly detailed or excessively normative or prescriptive frameworks. The new frameworks were conceived to accommodate the diversity of higher education programmes in the Netherlands and Flanders, and to respect the autonomy of institutions. The pilots of 2009 showed that stakeholders had a favourable attitude towards the new system. The development, implementation and operation of the new accreditation system is being monitored by resonance groups representing the important stakeholders in both Flanders and the Netherlands.

Self-evaluation

Initially, the institutions of higher education expressed their preference for a system of institutional accreditation only to replace the previous programme accreditation. A proposal to this extent was rejected by NVAO and the Dutch parliament. Eventually, the institutions accepted the new frameworks as a challenging innovation and actively took part in the development of the new system by participating in the pilots. This stakeholder involvement can be seen as a good practice. NVAO is convinced that the new system provides an effective compromise between firm quality assurance on programme level through programme accreditation, on the one hand, and reduction of the administrative burden through the institutional audit, on the other hand. The system allows for the enhancement, profiling^{6>}, and differentiation of individual programmes by applying for distinctive (quality) features. The profiling is further enhanced by the introduction of the use of a four-point scale for quality judgements on the standards of the framework (NL-FL) and in the overall conclusion.

6> Profiling is related to the mission, strategy and characteristics of an institution or programme. Differentiation is related to the level and quality of a programme.

Judgement

NVAO complies with the standard.

Point(s) of attention

> It is vital that NVAO remains in close contact with the stakeholders, especially the representing bodies of the higher education institutions, to evaluate the experiences and to monitor whether the system functions as intended, especially in the context of announced, new regulations by the Dutch government. Also in Flanders this is essential since the decree specifies two evaluations of the new accreditation system while being implemented. This dialogue should be open and done in full independence.

3.3 / Criteria for decisions

Any formal decisions made as a result of an external quality assurance activity should be based on explicit published criteria that are applied consistently.

The frameworks for EPA, IPA and IA use clearly distinguishable standards and a four-point scale (excellent, good, sufficient, insufficient), both for the assessment of the programme as a whole and for the separate standards. The underlying criteria and decision rules for each of these judgements are clearly outlined in the frameworks and explained in guidelines attached to the frameworks. The introduction of the recovery period in the Netherlands gives panels more leeway to pass a negative judgement when necessary, without causing a forced shutdown of a programme.

In the current Flemish frameworks the four-points scale is only applied to the sub-standards; here also the four-point scale is explained in guidelines. The recovery period has been part of the Flemish accreditation system since the start in 2005.

The NVAO has put in place the following measures to safeguard the consistent application of the criteria during the assessment of applications for accreditation:

> *Approval of panels by the NVAO*: in the Netherlands NVAO approves panels according to the criteria formulated in the requirements for assessment panels^{7>} and the accreditation frameworks. In Flanders panels are approved by the Recognition committee and in the near future by the evaluation body VLUHR^{8>} after a formal advise by NVAO,

- 7> Guideline 'Requirements for the composition of panels' of August 2011, [Leidraad Eisen aan de panelsamenstelling, Augustus 2011].
- 8> Manual 'Site visits VLIR and VLHORA', [Handleiding onderwijsvisitaties VLIR en VLHORA, Brussel, September 2008]. Since 2011 the evaluation bodies of VLIR and VLHORA merged into VLUHR; the only quality assurance agency in Flemish higher education. VLIR and VLHORA are still used separately to represent respectively the universities and the university colleges in Flanders.

using the protocol of VLUHR. A panel has to be approved before the assessment can take place.

- > *Training of secretaries* to assessment panels in the Netherlands^{9>} by NVAO. In Flanders the secretaries will be trained by VLUHR in consultation with NVAO.
- > *A clear procedure for the review and assessment of students' final assignments*^{10>} is used by the assessment panels in the Netherlands. A comparable procedure, included in the mentioned protocol of VLUHR, is applied in Flanders.
- > *The application of domain (cluster) assessments* in the entire higher education sector in the Netherlands and Flanders. Recently, the ministry of education has ruled that the Dutch professional higher education sector should also adopt the cluster approach in their assessments.

After completion of the assessment report and acceptance by the institution,^{11>} this can be submitted by the institution to the NVAO, together with an application for accreditation. NVAO has put in place several measures to ensure the consistency of the evaluation of assessment reports.

- > The use of detailed manuals for the evaluation of reports, which are updated on a regular basis.
- > Frequent staff meetings where issues regarding the evaluation of assessment reports are discussed.
- > Each application is evaluated by a policy advisor and a responsible board member. If the evaluation necessitates this, the NVAO asks other staff members or board members for a second opinion. A final decision on an application is taken by all board members in a joint session on the basis of a detailed proposal.
- > The applicant institution may be asked to provide additional information, to ensure that each application is fully documented according to the criteria outlined in the frameworks. Sometimes NVAO applies the instrument of additional assessment ('*Verificatie*' in the Netherlands, '*Aanvullende beoordeling*' in Flanders).

Self-evaluation

The new frameworks contain less standards and criteria than the previous frameworks. In the evaluation of the accreditation system in 2008 all stakeholders mentioned the use of

- 9> NVAO trained about 185 secretaries in the Netherlands in 2011 and 2012. After successful completion of the training a secretary is certified for one year and his performance is monitored by NVAO based on the panel reports he produces. VLUHR trains the secretaries in Flanders as they are usually employees of this organisation.
- 10> 'NVAO guideline for the purpose of the assessment of graduation projects during site visits' of July 2011 [Richtlijn NVAO beoordeling afstudeerwerken door panels tijdens het visitatieproces voor accreditatie en (indien van toepassing) een toets nieuwe opleiding, 8 Juli 2011].
- 11> In Flanders the assessment report is published on the website of VLUHR before the institution applies for accreditation by NVAO.

open frameworks as a strong element. Open frameworks enable programmes and institutions to demonstrate required quality in their own specific way and allow for profiling and differentiation.

It is the opinion of NVAO that the accreditation system has improved in the second phase, especially regarding the consistent application of criteria. The introduction of the recovery period, the training of secretaries and clear procedures for the assessment of students' assignments have reinforced the system.

Another important improvement is the appointment of panels. In the near future panels in the Netherlands will be appointed and reimbursed by NVAO. The institutions will then reimburse NVAO. NVAO considers this change as a meaningful reinforcement of the independency and authority of panels. In the previous accreditation system the quality assurance agencies operated on request of the institutions and this relationship has been indicated as a weak point in the system. The appointment of panels in Flanders is still executed by VLUHR and the recognition committee. All stakeholders agree on this procedure, partly because the former QAA's from VLIR and VLHORA are compliant with the ESG from ENQA and are EQAR-registered. In the new accreditation framework VLUHR will consult NVAO on the composition of panels before taking a decision.

Judgement

NVAO complies with the standard.

Point(s) of attention

- › Open frameworks contain less detailed criteria and its proper application depends for a major part on the expertise of panels and the way they apply the criteria. NVAO should monitor whether panels apply the criteria in a consistent manner.
- › The application of the four-point scale should be monitored thoroughly in order to achieve consistent use and a well-balanced score motivation by the panels and NVAO.

3.4 / Processes fit for purpose

All external quality assurance processes should be designed specifically to ensure their fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for them.

Facts and findings

The Netherlands decided on putting in place an external quality assurance system (EQA) based on peer and expert review and open frameworks as the best system to achieve three main objectives of EQA:

- › To guarantee that all accredited programmes have the required quality;
- › To assess the overall quality of a study programme on a four-point scale;
- › To contribute to the enhancement, profiling and differentiation of higher education programmes.

As mentioned, in Flanders the new accreditation system is still under construction. Both in the current and the planned system peer and expert review form the core of the system, based on open standards. In Flanders the judgement on the standards will be verified in technical annexes. It is not decided yet whether the four-point scale will be applied on the study programme level, next to each standard.

In the (initial) accreditation procedure roughly three steps can be distinguished.

- › The writing and submission of the self-evaluation report (in the case of accreditation) or the information file (in the case of initial accreditation) by the institution. The writing of the self-evaluation report is guided by the protocols of the QAA's, which are based upon the NVAO frameworks.
- › The composition of the assessment panel, the actual site-visit and the assessment by the panel. A panel consists of at least four experts including a student member. The expertise of the panel should include knowledge of the discipline, of the professional field, of education in the domain, of the international dimension, and experience in reviewing or auditing. Student members are trained by NVAO for the procedures for initial accreditation and institutional audit. Panel members participating in the accreditation procedure are instructed by the quality assurance agencies
- › The third step is the decision-making process by NVAO. If NVAO takes a negative accreditation decision, the programme may be granted a recovery period or the application may be withdrawn by the institution.

The voluntary institutional audit is a new and second element in the new accreditation system. It comprises an assessment by an audit committee of whether the institution is 'in control' of the quality and the achieved learning outcomes of its programmes. In order to answer this question the audit committee assesses the adequacy of the institutional strategy, its implementation through policy and the educational processes on institutional level. Institutions that pass the institutional audit successfully are entitled to submit a *limited programme assessment* (LPA). Institutions that don't opt for an institutional audit or have failed the audit submit an *extensive programme assessment* (EPA). Flanders still has to decide about some elements of this system, but it is clear already that the institutional audit and LPA will be compulsory.

An important objective of the new accreditation system is the reduction of the bureaucratic burden on institutions caused by the (programme) assessments. The application of IA and LPA is supposed to save time and energy in comparison with EPA. However, in the starting phase of the new system the combined process of institutional audit and programme assessments might cause additional work. The NVAO has committed itself to a reduction of 25% of the administrative burden of programme accreditation. This was an important condition for the stakeholders to accept the new system. For this reason NVAO will continue to monitor the bureaucratic loads the new accreditation system entails. It can do so by limiting the extent of the self-evaluation report following the decrease of the numbers of standards, by negotiating with the QAAs on shortening the duration of site-visits specified in their protocols, and by making sure that the reports are clear, self-evident and to the point, so that additional requests for clarification or additions during the accreditation process can be prevented or limited.

A new element of the accreditation system in the Netherlands is the wider application of distinctive features. Now institutions can apply for distinctive features at programme *and* institutional level in order to enlarge the possibilities of profiling and differentiation, which is a broadly accepted objective in Dutch higher education. . Up till 1 January 2012 NVAO awarded 23 distinctive features and 19 applications for distinctive quality (the score Excellent on a standard of the framework) in the Netherlands. In Flanders the distinctive quality feature is part of the system as well. Up till 1 January 2012 NVAO awarded 13 applications for a distinctive quality feature in Flanders.

NVAO carries out the procedure for initial accreditation without involving a QAA in the Netherlands and in Flanders, including the evaluation of the assessment process. Evaluation results show that institutions and panels are quite satisfied with the process. However, institutions indicate that deadlines should be respected better.

Self-evaluation

The current accreditation system heralds a new approach. The previous system focused on establishing basic quality of programmes as required for accreditation, whereas the new system challenges programmes and institutions to set higher targets. New elements were introduced in Dutch law regarding differentiation and profiling. NVAO is in favour of these changes as they challenge institutions and programmes to improve quality by defining a more explicit profile.

The new accreditation system operates in the Netherlands since 1 January 2011. The first impressions and experiences are favourable. The institutional audit causes staff to reflect more intensively on internal quality assurance at an institutional level. The assessed institutions consider the audit a valuable learning experience that will positively affect the quality of the programmes they offer.

As a result of the introduction of LPA and EPA the first panel reports prove to be more informative and transparent than previous reports, and enable NVAO to lessen its workload during the decision making on programme accreditations.

The current system in Flanders operates to the considerable satisfaction of the stakeholders. VLUHR has an important role in the system as it organises the programme assessments and the composition of the panels.

Judgement

NVAO complies with the standard.

Point(s) of attention

- › The implementation of the new frameworks implies that institutions and programmes have to get used to the new information files and self-evaluation reports. Therefore it may take longer before the 25% reduction of administrative burden will be achieved. All stakeholders should be aware of that.
- › During the coming years, NVAO will have to carefully monitor the composition and the operation of panels, as well as the operation of secretaries, as the success of system depends for a large part on the quality on their work.
- › The training of panel members. NVAO trains the chairpersons of panels of the institutional audit, but the panels members themselves are not trained by NVAO. Quality assurance agencies instruct panel members preceding the review. NVAO should consider whether a training for panel members is a realistic objective.
- › In Flanders, the cooperation with the VLUHR concerning the quality of panels and reports should be intensified, as it is subject of a mid-term evaluation of the new accreditation system in 2017-2018.

3.5 / Reporting

Reports should be published and should be written in a style which is clear and readily accessible to its intended readership. Any decisions, commendations or recommendations contained in reports should be easy for a reader to find.

Facts and findings

The assessment reports and decision documents have a fixed and structured format to increase readability. In the last two years NVAO trained secretaries in NL (partly employees of the quality assurance agencies) in report writing. Special attention has been given to the newly introduced executive summary of the report. The new summary has to be very concise in order to inform an interested reader at a glance about the most relevant characteristics of the programme. Additionally, every report contains a scoring table and a separate paragraph with recommendations. The summary and the scoring table are integral part of the decision document. Regarding the readability of reports NVAO started in 2012 an evaluation project to investigate whether the new reports respond well to the needs of the intended readers.

Both NVAO's decisions and the panel assessment reports are made public on NVAO's website (www.nvao.net). The site is equipped with a search tool to find information about a specific programme or an institution. It is NVAO's aim that relevant information in the assessment reports and decisions should be easily accessible for the intended readers, such as students, their parents, the professional field and, finally, the general public and the government. In this regard NVAO is considering the use of social media to inform its main stakeholders more adequately about decisions and reports. The distribution of specific website links to target groups is an option.

On a regular basis NVAO gives feedback to the quality assurance agencies and secretaries concerning the quality of the reports they produced. In Flanders secretaries receive feedback from VLUHR in cooperation with NVAO. On 14 May 2012, for instance, an evaluation meeting between secretaries of VLUHR and NVAO staff is planned regarding the quality of reports. The new accreditation system in Flanders gives NVAO the authority to reject a report, when it is found lacking sufficient quality to serve as a basis for an accreditation decision. The new system also requires a readable summary to be included in the report. Both options already exist in the new accreditation system in the Netherlands.

Additional formal information about accredited programmes and higher education institutions is provided by the registers on higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders: respectively CROHO¹² and HOR¹³.

¹² > Central register for higher education programmes in the Netherlands [CROHO: Het Centraal Register Opleidingen Hoger onderwijs]. CROHO is maintained by the governmental organisation DUO, [Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs in Groningen]. CROHO is accessible for the public (www.croho.nl).

¹³ > Higher Education in Flanders [HOR: Het Hogeronderwijsregister] HOR is developed and maintained by NVAO and is accessible for the general public (www.hogeronderwijsregister.be).

Self-evaluation

NVAO monitored the quality of reports during the previous accreditation period. With the introduction of the new system in the Netherlands and Flanders NVAO agreed with the quality assurance agencies to improve the readability of the reports. The first results in the Netherlands are promising. It is expected that the main findings and conclusions of a report will be read better by students, employers and other involved groups.

NVAO's website contains all accredited programmes in the Netherlands and Flanders, but the site does not reach enough visitors. It is the opinion of NVAO that especially (future) students, their parents and employers can profit from adequate information about the quality of study programmes. This information can help future students to choose a study programme and employers, for instance, in case of deciding to engage themselves in a partnership with an institution of higher education.

As it appears to be difficult to inform stakeholders adequately, NVAO will explore other options to communicate effectively with these groups, for instance through social media. At the moment NVAO acts within its ability to inform especially students and employers.

Judgement

NVAO complies with the standard.

Point(s) of attention

> NVAO should monitor whether the readability of the assessment reports and NVAO's decisions is increasingly appreciated by students, employers and other involved groups.

3.6 / Follow-up procedures

Quality assurance processes which contain recommendations for action or which require a subsequent action plan, should have a predetermined follow-up procedure which is implemented consistently.

Facts and findings

In the previous accreditation system in the Netherlands yes/no decisions were made unconditionally. Therefore, the NVAO could not formally demand improvement actions. The higher education institutions were responsible for the follow-up on the recommendations of the assessment panel, and the improvements were subject to assessment in the subsequent evaluation procedure.

Because of the lack of a recovery period in the first phase in the Netherlands NVAO decided to introduce the instrument

specific agreements in order to create an appropriate arrangement regarding the accreditation of particular programmes. When accreditation cannot be refused to a programme, but serious doubts remain, NVAO can propose to the board of the institution to deliver a report of an additional panel assessment after three years. The agreement is voluntary, but in almost all cases institutions have agreed to this proposal in recent years.

In Flanders the instrument of specific agreements has not been applied, because of the more formal approach regarding accreditation outlined in Flemish legislation and the existence of a recovery period from the start of the system in 2005. In the current system a recovery period is granted by the Flemish government. In the new Flemish system NVAO will decide on this period with a maximum of three years. In the current as well as in the future system in Flanders the new institutional audit and the programme accreditation decision focuses specifically on the follow-up based on the recovery plan.

An official follow-up procedure, as meant here in the ESG guideline, is not part of the new accreditation system either, but two measures introduce elements that provide equivalent functionality to a follow-up procedure in the new system in the Netherlands:^{14>}

- > The implementation of the recovery period in the procedure of programme accreditation.
- > The authority of NVAO to take a conditionally positive decision in the procedure of initial accreditation and institutional audit.

In case of the application of a recovery period the programme has to present a convincing recovery plan before the recovery period is granted. At the end of the recovery period the achieved improvements have to be assessed positively by an assessment panel before accreditation can be granted.

In case of a conditional decision in the Netherlands a NVAO panel must assess whether the programme or the institution meets the conditions within the set conditional period. No follow-up procedure is applied when a programme is accredited on the basis of a report that contains recommendations from the assessment panel. In that case, the follow-up on these recommendations will be assessed in the subsequent accreditation procedure (after six or eight years [NL-FL]).

A list of recommendations of the kind mentioned above can be included in the panel report in the new system, and provides an additional incentive for a good follow-up by the programme management or the institution.

14> A recovery period has been part of the accreditation system in Flanders since the start in 2005.

The new situation in The Netherlands and Flanders can be illustrated as follows for each of the assessment procedures:

Formal

Institutional audit: in case of a conditional decision

- > a follow-up procedure is applied

Accreditation: decision:

- positive: > recommendations are part of the panel report
- negative: > recovery period > follow-up procedure is applied
> no recovery period > shutdown programme

Initial Accreditation: decision

- conditional for 1 year > follow-up procedure is applied
- unconditional > FL: approval for *'the length and two'*^{15>}
> NL: variable period to decide by NVAO

Informal

Specific agreements (NL)

Self-evaluation

During the previous accreditation system NVAO has repeatedly stated that a recovery period in the Netherlands would improve the Dutch system. A simple yes/no-decision seems clear and strong at first sight, but it invites anticipatory behaviour of programme representatives and panels to avoid negative outcomes. Therefore opponents of external quality assurance mention 'window dressing' by programme representatives as significant disruptive behaviour during site-visits. On the other hand advocates of the system emphasize the peer review approach applied in an environment of trust and quality culture as the best condition to assess educational programmes and to contribute to its enhancement.

NVAO is convinced that a recovery period and systematic follow-up on the basis of a recovery plan contribute to the flexibility of the system, to the independent and expert's judgement of the panels and to an open attitude of programme representatives. Therefore NVAO welcomes the recovery period (NL) and the possibility of conditional decisions regarding initial accreditation (NL) and the keeping of the recovery period in FL.

Judgement

NVAO complies with the standard.

15> In Flanders initial accreditation is given for the length of the programme and two years (e.g. a professional bachelor programme of three years is approved for five years).

3.7 / Periodic reviews

External quality assurance of institutions and/or programmes should be undertaken on a cyclical basis. The length of the cycle and the review procedures to be used should be clearly defined and published in advance.

Facts and findings

The accreditation period of programmes in the Netherlands is six years, in Flanders it is eight years. After an initial accreditation, reassessment of the programme and reaccreditation should be finalized within six years (in the Netherlands) and within the length of the programme and two years (in Flanders). These cycles are registered in Dutch and Flemish legislation. Within a set period before the accreditation period has expired, the institution should submit an assessment report and an application for accreditation to NVAO.

The recommendation of the former ENQA committee in 2007 to equalize the accreditation cycles in the Netherlands and Flanders has not yet been implemented. In the opinion of NVAO a cycle of eight years is too long and that is why NVAO discussed this point with relevant stakeholders. However, only the governments of Flanders and the Netherlands have the authority to change the length of the cycles.

The six-year re-assessment timeframe for accreditations is considered to be adequate. However, the six-year re-assessment timeframe for initial accreditation in the Netherlands is considered to be too long. In the new Dutch accreditation system NVAO can decide on the duration of the initial accreditation, with a minimum of one and a maximum of six years. In Flanders the duration of the initial accreditation will remain the length of the programme and two years, while the accreditation period of study programmes will first remain eight years, before being reduced to six years in order to come in line with the institutional reviews.^{16>}

Self-evaluation

The accreditation process is undertaken on a cyclical basis, which is clearly defined in both Dutch and Flemish legislation. All frameworks and procedures are published in advance. NVAO has addressed the topic of equal accreditation cycles between the Netherlands and Flanders in the meetings of both Ministers [*Comité van Ministers*] in recent years. It is expected that the third round of accreditation in Flanders (probably to start in 2021) will offer an accreditation cycle of six years. The new authority of NVAO in the Netherlands to decide on the duration of an initial accreditation is an important improvement, as is the shift of authority from the Flemish

government to the NVAO to decide on the recovery period of a study programme in Flanders, before this can be accredited.

Judgement

NVAO complies with the standard.

3.8 / System-wide analyses

Quality assurance agencies should produce from time to time summary reports describing and analyzing the general findings of their reviews, evaluations, assessments etc.

Facts and findings

In chapter 9.1 the topic of comparative analyses is discussed in the context of the follow-up on the recommendations of the ENQA review committee in 2007. In the past years NVAO completed eight comparative analyses of various kinds. Attachment 1 provides a full description of these completed analyses, in which a distinction can be made between comparative analyses on the level of a cluster of the same study programmes and at the level of a domain.

In 2012 NVAO will start an international benchmarking of four professional bachelor programmes in Switzerland, Finland, Flanders and the Netherlands in order to compare accepted quality indicators in these countries.

Until recently, initiatives to comparative analyses were based on facts and findings in assessment reports or on requests from the higher education sector or the Minister.

Cluster assessment contributes to comparative analyses. Nearly all Dutch and Flemish programmes will be subject to clustered assessments organised by QAAs, since it has been decided to reintroduce this approach in Dutch professional education. The reports of the clustered programmes are published in the same period accompanied by a comprehensive panel report containing general considerations regarding the involved discipline and programmes. This report provides an additional, more generic view on the performance of these programmes, which is also used by NVAO for its own comparative analyses.

Besides comparative analyses on the level of clusters or domains, system-wide analyses on the level of the system itself are internally planned, as part of NVAO's internal quality assurance (see chapter 4.8) or as part of piloting the new accreditation system or its implementation. Both in the Netherlands and Flanders system-wide evaluations of the new accreditation system are foreseen, which will be (partly) done by NVAO.

^{16>} Flanders uses the term Institutional review instead of Institutional audit.

As NVAO's new strategic policy underlines the importance of comparative and system-wide analyses NVAO recruited a new staff member assigned to do quantitative and qualitative research to underpin the analyses.

Self-evaluation

Despite the substantial effort of NVAO regarding comparative analyses, NVAO did not have a clear policy on this theme and time in recent years. In the new Strategic Policy Statement of NVAO (2012 - 2016) the NVAO task of system-wide and comparative analyses is emphasized and should result in a clear agenda on this topic for the coming years.

Another point for improvement concerns the follow-up of the results of system-wide or comparative analyses. The analysis only makes sense if the results are thoroughly discussed with representatives of the institutions and programmes involved. Subsequently, the institutions should accept the results as meaningful for further improvement of the programmes involved. NVAO should take more initiatives to start these discussions while and after completing a system-wide or comparative analysis.

In conclusion it can be stated that NVAO completed eight comparative analyses in the past years and is therefore compliant with the guideline of this standard, as it is required 'that summary reports must be produced from time to time'. Nevertheless, NVAO has to work on implementing its new policy regarding system-wide and comparative analyses.

Judgement

NVAO complies with the standard.

Point(s) of attention

- › To implement a clear policy and activities regarding system-wide analyses through yearly planning.

Chapter

4

Analysis of
Standards

and

Guidelines

part 3

4.1 / Use of external quality assurance procedures for higher education

The external quality assurance of agencies should take into account the presence and effectiveness of the external quality assurance processes described in Part 2 of the European Standards and Guidelines.

In chapter 3 it is described how NVAO takes into account all European Standards and Guidelines of Part 2.

Judgement

NVAO complies with the standard.

4.2 / Official status

Agencies should be formally recognised by competent public authorities in the European Higher Education Area as agencies with responsibilities for external quality assurance and should have an established legal basis. They should comply with any requirements of the legislative jurisdictions within which they operate.

Facts and findings

NVAO is the official, public and binational accreditation organisation in higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders. Its structure and duties are described in the binational Treaty^{17>} and in both national legislations. NVAO reports to the Dutch and Flemish Parliaments via their Ministers of (Higher) Education. NVAO's annual report is used for accountability purposes.

NVAO was granted the status of an autonomous administrative body with legal rights according to Dutch legislation. Consequently, NVAO does not resort under a particular minister and is not subject to ministerial responsibility. NVAO has full decision-making powers concerning decisions about (initial) accreditation.

However, NVAO is accountable to the Committee of Ministers, which approves its budget, the annual report and the annual accounts. In accordance with the Treaty, the Committee of Ministers can only intervene in case of serious neglect by NVAO of its (initial) accreditation task, threatening the execution of

^{17>} Treaty between the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Flemish Community of Belgium regarding the accreditation of programmes within Dutch and Flemish higher education, The Hague, 3 September 2003 [Verdrag tussen het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden en de Vlaamse Gemeenschap van België inzake de accreditatie van opleidingen binnen het Nederlandse en Vlaamse hoger onderwijs]. Referred to in this document as the Treaty.

that task. The Committee of Ministers can thus only intervene in the functioning of NVAO, but not in NVAO's decision-making.

Self-evaluation

The official status offers NVAO a good formal structure to guarantee its independence. Its binational nature is an unique and interesting example regarding the objective of the Bologna treaty of 1999 to expand cross border cooperation and to achieve one European higher education area. During the last years lots of international delegations visited NVAO, because of its binational nature and to learn from the cooperation in the field of external quality assurance between the Netherlands and Flanders.

From the start of NVAO in 2005 it was expected that a binational organisation would reinforce the Dutch-Flemish cooperation in EQAHE, which also came about. It resulted for instance in a frequent exchange of peers in the panels between the Netherlands and Flanders, and NVAO applies the same criteria to decide on Dutch and Flemish applications. However, progress on the mutual recognition of degrees between the two countries has been limited. The planned new Treaty offers a new opportunity in this case. The making of one unified list of (initially) accredited programmes to underpin mutual recognition would be a step forward. Even a generic recognition of the levels of the degrees is in sight.

Judgement

NVAO complies with the standard.

Point(s) of attention

> From its binational nature NVAO contributes to the alignment of the Dutch and Flemish systems of higher education, including the mutual recognition of degrees. Little progress has been made in recent years in this respect and therefore more attention must be paid to it. A generic recognition is in sight thanks to the attention drawn by NVAO and others.

4.3 / Activities

Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities (at the institutional or programme level) on a regular basis.

Facts and findings

The tasks of NVAO are described in the Treaty. They are further stipulated in the Netherlands in the Dutch Act^{18>} on higher education and research and can be summarized as the (initial) accreditation of programmes of institutions of

^{18>} [Wet op het hoger onderwijs en wetenschappelijk onderzoek, 1 januari 2011], changed version due to the new accreditation system.

higher education and the assessment of these institutions (Institutional audit).

In Flanders, the Flemish Act of 4 April 2003¹⁹ forms the legal basis for (initial) accreditation in higher education and stipulates that the responsibility for (initial) accreditation of programmes is assigned to NVAO. The number and type of NVAO's decisions up to 1 January 2012 are illustrated in chapter 8.1, table 7.

Another important task of NVAO stipulated by the Treaty concerns the international perspective on the decisions and position of NVAO. This aspect is dealt with in chapter 8.4: The international assignment of NVAO.

Since 30 April 2009 NVAO has also been empowered to validate the discipline-specific learning outcomes of bachelor's and master's programmes in Flanders.

The structures of the external quality assurance systems in the Netherlands and Flanders will be discussed in Chapter 7. All higher education programmes in the Netherlands and Flanders must be accredited on a regular basis; in the Netherlands every six years, in Flanders every eight years. The Dutch institutions in higher education are subject to an institutional audit every six years. In the new system in Flanders institutions probably will be subject to an institutional audit every six years.

NVAO is charged with several additional tasks, which are described in detail in chapter 8.5 and attachment 2. These additional assessment tasks enable NVAO to acquire a better insight in quality issues in Dutch and Flemish higher education and internationally.

An example of the organisation of NVAO's processes of (initial) accreditation is further described in the workflow scheme in attachment 3.

Self-evaluation

In evaluation discussions about the accreditation process with institutions in higher education and with quality assurance agencies in the Netherlands, the major comments of both stakeholders concern the following points:

- NVAO should respect the formal deadlines better.
- additional questions and additional assessments by NVAO; stakeholders believe that these additional activities unnecessarily increase the administrative burden in the system.

In 2011, parallel to the regular meetings with VLUHR and the Flemish cabinet, NVAO visited in Flanders all higher education

institutions to discuss their experiences with application procedures for accreditation at NVAO. In general NVAO respects deadlines in Flanders due to the strict regulations in Flanders. Regarding additional questions and additional assessments the Flemish higher education institutions have the same opinion as the Dutch institutions. The results of these evaluation meetings in both countries are processed in NVAO's IQA activities.

As there are approximately 600 existing programmes and 100 new programmes to be accredited in the Netherlands and Flanders each year, the (administrative) assessment burden is high. One of the aims of the new system is to lower this burden and to focus on the heart of the matter: 'does the programme achieve what it preaches on an internationally accepted level?' NVAO expects that better and convincing reports will be a positive outcome of the new assessment process and, as a consequence, that NVAO can reduce its additional assessment activities. This would be an improvement of the accreditation process.

NVAO played a proactive role in the period 2008-2010 in the evaluation and development of the new accreditation system and, naturally, supports it strongly. NVAO is convinced that the new accreditation system in the Netherlands challenges institutions to work on objectives as profiling, differentiation and quality enhancement. The new accreditation system in Flanders will probably incorporate the objectives differentiation and quality enhancement. Profiling is not an actual issue in Flemish higher education.

Judgement

NVAO complies with the standard.

Point(s) of attention

- NVAO should respect deadlines better. A newly appointed coordinator for assessments manages the workflow in the organisational process, which should contribute to a timely completion of applications. A careful and timely completion of primary tasks must have priority. Additional tasks should be part of a structured and realistic yearly plan.
- NVAO should monitor whether the aim of decreasing numbers of additional assessments and additional questions will be achieved in the coming years. It is obvious that from the outset NVAO should try to avoid duplicating the work of panels.

¹⁹ Decree on the restructuring of higher education in Flanders, 4 april 2003.

4.4 / Resources

Agencies should have adequate and proportional resources, both human and financial, to enable them to organize and run their external quality assurance process(es) in an effective and efficient manner, with appropriate provision for the development of their processes and procedures.

Facts and findings

NVAO has a (General) Board of 11 members^{20>}. The chair and three other Board members constitute the Executive Board. NVAO also has an Advisory Council of 14 members^{21>}.

The workforce of NVAO consists of 56 people (53,1 fte): four executive Board members, one managing director, 30 policy advisors, one Dutch and one Flemish legal advisor^{22>} (together 29,1 fte^{23>}) and 20 other (partly supporting) staff (19 fte). Four policy advisors are available for international assignments. The staff includes policy, legal and communication advisors and supporting staff (policy secretariat, finances and personnel, records department and general services).

Decisions are prepared by the policy and legal advisors and at least one Executive Board member. In 2010 the Board (re) appointed four policy advisors as coordinators for the areas Assessments, New accreditation system, Internal quality assurance and Internationalisation. In their role as coordinators policy advisors remain accountable to the director. See the organisational chart (attachment 4).

Core competences of NVAO's staff

All academic staff hold a master's degree, three hold a PhD degree. The executive board of NVAO consists of four members, two from the Netherlands, two from Flanders. The primary responsibility of the board is the accreditation process and the accreditation decisions. A managing director is responsible for the management process of NVAO.

The acquired professional experience of NVAO's staff is varied. All board members and the director have a longer career in (higher) education in board or management positions. Most staff acquired substantial work experience in higher education as teacher, developer, manager, researcher, inspector for higher education or policy advisor, before being employed at NVAO. A small group of junior staff was recruited

to fulfil a kind of traineeship before being fully employable in NVAO's work processes.

Compared to similar members within the ENQA network, NVAO staff is on par^{24>}. NVAO has built a staff group of good quality.

Finances

NVAO has an annual budget of approximately € 6 million, which is financed jointly by the Netherlands (60%) and Flanders (40%). Each year NVAO draws up a budget which is then decided upon by the Committee of Ministers and both Parliaments. In the Netherlands and Flanders NVAO applies fixed rates by law. The rate for an application initial accreditation is maximum € 15.000 in the Netherlands and € 5.000 in Flanders. For an application accreditation the rate is € 750 in the Netherlands and € 500 in Flanders. In case of additional tasks and assessment assignments abroad NVAO charges cost-covering fees.

Facilities

Since 2005 NVAO is located at the Parkstraat in The Hague, near the city and the Dutch parliament and the Dutch ministry. Good facilities are available here. Several meeting rooms for smaller and larger groups are available to organise conferences, seminars and meetings. Presentation and IT-facilities are up-to-date. In November 2011 a new information system was introduced to optimize the work-flow.^{25>}

Self-evaluation

NVAO has been funded sufficiently by both governments for its primary tasks in recent years. However, due to the substantial size of additional tasks that were assigned to NVAO, additional funding was needed. NVAO agreed with both ministries in the Netherlands and Flanders that additional tasks will be organised and budgeted on a project basis. NVAO informs the ministries in advance about the expected costs. The latter can decide whether to continue the project initiative or not.

All public organisations, including NVAO are currently subject to public cuts initiated by the governments in the Netherlands and Flanders. These cuts don't affect NVAO seriously up to now.

During the years NVAO developed a good quality of staff with varied competences and work experiences. Dutch and Flemish

20> The members of the General Board act on personal name and don't represent an organisation.

21> The members of the Advisory Board represent stakeholder organisations.

22> The activities of the Flemish legal advisor are outsourced by NVAO to a Flemish legal consultancy firm.

23> About one-third of the policy advisors is Flemish, two-third is Dutch.

24> In 2011 the ENQA network Internal Quality Assurance completed a first benchmark study on Staff development among 5 members of ENQA [QAA (UK), ACQUIN (GE), EVA (DK), ANECA (SP), NVAO (NL)]. NVAO participated actively in this benchmark. The results will be presented on the ENQA website in Spring 2012.

25> NVAO uses a document management system (DMS) of RICOH.

board and staff members form a productive mixture and the chemistry between the Dutch and the Flemish part of NVAO is good. Flemish staff are deployed on Dutch and Flemish applications and vice versa. Perceived culture differences are rather stimulating and don't cause problems. A point for improvement is the further development of expertise of staff on specific themes in higher education.

Judgement

NVAO complies with the standard.

Point(s) of attention

› NVAO should invest in further development of specific, theme-oriented, higher education expertise of staff.

4.5 / Mission statement

Agencies should have clear and explicit goals and objectives for their work, contained in a publicly available statement.

Facts and findings

In 2012 NVAO renewed its Strategic Policy Statement²⁶ for the period 2012-2016, which includes NVAO's new mission, that was approved by the General Board on 19th March 2012 and is published on NVAO's website and included in this report as attachment 5.

Mission

NVAO has defined its new mission as follows:

NVAO is the independent and authoritative binational accreditation organisation set up by the Flemish and Dutch governments, whose primary goal it is to provide an expert and objective judgement of the quality of higher education in Flanders and the Netherlands. NVAO does this with a constructive, critical attitude, respecting the autonomy of institutions and their primary responsibility for the quality of their education, and with an open eye for the growing international context. NVAO is open, clear and transparent towards society and all concerned, especially the institutions of higher education and the students.

In its Strategic Policy Statement NVAO states that it considers institutions primarily responsible for quality assurance and quality improvement. NVAO is assigned to assure that programmes meet the required standards and to stimulate the quality debate, giving account of its procedures, disseminating 'good practices' and visiting the institutions

and programmes. NVAO respects the autonomy of institutions, which are responsible for their internal quality assurance and for taking measures for quality improvement.

Its mission commits NVAO to be strongly present and communicative in the quality debate in higher education. In practice, NVAO's role in stimulating debate in recent years can be illustrated by referring to its conferences, seminars, intensive meetings with the stakeholders and a large number of visits each year to institutions in the Netherlands and Flanders. During these visits, discussions are held with the management of the institution on, among other things, their experiences with the accreditation system and the analysis of a series of accreditation decisions for their programmes. The meetings are initiated by NVAO. In addition, members of the NVAO Executive Board or staff often give presentations at conferences. NVAO organises its own conference every two years either in the Netherlands or in Flanders. Furthermore, the NVAO newsletters, published every two months, give more information on several issues regarding accreditation.

Self-evaluation

The discussions preparing a new mission statement concentrated for a part on the question whether NVAO should concentrate on its assurance assignment, its enhancement assignment or both. These discussions were affected by the introduction of a new accreditation system, the international developments and recent quality incidents and their consequences in Dutch professional education. These events pushed the Dutch in the direction of stressing the assurance assignment, while the objective of the new accreditation system and the role of NVAO initially was more oriented towards the enhancement assignment.

The newly introduced institutional audits, focusing on policies and the IQA system of the institution provide a good opportunity to focus on quality enhancement, like the planned, extended realisation of system-wide or comparative analyses. The latter two focus on quality enhancement rather than on quality assurance. NVAO is of the opinion that in a well-operating accreditation system the emphasis should be on the enhancement objective. In the final Strategic Policy Statement this discussion was concluded.

Judgement

NVAO complies with the standard.

Point(s) of attention

› NVAO should assess regularly whether it achieves a consistent balance between its accountability and

²⁶ Strategic Policy statement NVAO 2012 - 2016, 13 February 2012
[Strategische beleidsverklaring NVAO 2012-2016]

enhancement assignment, an assessment that should not be dictated by ad hoc issues in higher education.

4.6 / Independence

Agencies should be independent to the extent both that they have autonomous responsibility for their operations and that the conclusions and recommendations made in their reports cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders.

Facts and findings

The independence of NVAO has been described in detail in chapter 4.2. Here it can be added that members of NVAO's Executive and General Board are mandated by the Committee of Ministers for four years. They are appointed on strictly personal capacity and not as representatives. The other Advisory Council members represent different stakeholders (see chapter 4.8).

In order to guarantee the independence of board and staff members, NVAO has ruled that both cannot participate in applications from institutions or programmes they have been associated with in any form during the last five years. Members of the Board have to be completely independent in taking decisions. If there is a specific application where this independence cannot be guaranteed, the member of the Board will withdraw from the decision-making process for the programme concerned. NVAO is responsible for recruiting its own staff and the decisions it takes.

NVAO's independence is recognised by different stakeholders. NVAO is regarded as the quality controller of the quality assurance organisations' panels, site-visits and reports. Two examples can illustrate this.

For instance, the Dutch parliament asked NVAO on 26 January 2012 to explain the operation and the first experiences of the new accreditation system in order to convince the members of parliament of the reliability of the new accreditation system in the Netherlands.

In 2010 NVAO was invited by the Flemish Parliament to explain its work and opinions on the new accreditation system in its Commission of Education. In Flanders NVAO has been allowed as member of the Advisory group (*Adviesgroep*) of VLOR, the official Flemish Educational Council (*Vlaamse Onderwijsraad*) to advise the government about the structure and operation of the new accreditation system in Flanders.

These examples illustrate that NVAO is not considered as a purely executive organisation by the involved stakeholders. This position allows NVAO to advise independently on the new system.

Self-evaluation

From the start of the accreditation system in the Netherlands and Flanders (2004, NL – 2005, FL) NVAO has been completely independent regarding decision making. This independence is the best guarantee for a transparent and strong decision making process.

It is not always easy to demonstrate NVAO's independence to all stakeholders, especially its position towards the parliament and the institutions. The best proof of NVAO's independence is that it is sometimes perceived by the ministries and politicians as too soft to the institutions, while the institutions sometimes blame NVAO for being too severe in following the political demand for robustness and transparency. This is partly linked to NVAO's deliberate choice for both accreditation and quality enhancement (see chapter 4.5). This delicate balance can only be maintained as a result of NVAO's strict independence and its policy not to mix decision-making with advice. All recommendations for the improvement of programmes are formulated by independent panels. NVAO sometimes only chooses to highlight some of the recommendations.

Judgement

NVAO complies with the standard.

Point(s) of attention

> NVAO has to communicate strongly, independently and, especially, proactively. Therefore a new communications strategy has been set up recently.

4.7 / External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies

The processes, criteria and procedures used by agencies should be predefined and publicly available. These processes will normally be expected to include:

- > *a self-assessment or equivalent procedure by the subject of the quality assurance process;*
- > *an external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate, (a) student member(s), and site visits as decided by the agency;*
- > *publication of a report, including any decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes;*
- > *a follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report.*

In the previous Dutch and the current Flemish system the 21 criteria or standards are grouped in 6 subjects (aims, programme, staff, facilities, internal quality assurance (IQA) and achieved results). These criteria were developed in coop-

eration with all stakeholders and are perceived as clear and robust, but also as burdensome for the management of programmes because in most institutions systems for HRM, IQA and other policies are often formulated and managed at the institutional level. Therefore, standards for accreditation of study programmes in the new system have been limited to three (general aims and intended learning outcomes, the learning environment and the achieved learning outcomes), and an institutional audit is introduced. The standards and underlying criteria in the new system were developed in cooperation with all stakeholders through pilots and evaluation. The previous standards and criteria are only maintained in the new system in the framework for EPA. The criteria within the Dutch and Flemish systems are described more in detail in chapter 3.3.

Chapter 3.4 described the successive steps of the (initial) accreditation procedure in the Netherlands and Flanders. Here follows a summary of these steps, which applies both to the previous Dutch and the current Flemish system, as well as to the new accreditation system (NL, FL in 2013).

- › The institution writes and submits the self-evaluation report or the information file.
- › A panel from a quality assurance agency or an NVAO panel carries out a site-visit and an assessment of a programme.
- › The panel prepares an advice to the Board of NVAO and informs the institution about an outline of its conclusions of the assessment at the end of the site-visit.

In case of programme accreditation the institution has to submit an application to the NVAO based on the panel report. In case of the new institutional audit or initial accreditation the NVAO panel presents the report of its findings and judgements to the board of NVAO.

- › The next step is the decision-making process by NVAO. If NVAO takes a negative accreditation decision on an application for accreditation, the institution must either stop the programme immediately or it can be granted a recovery period. If NVAO intends to take a negative decision on an application for initial accreditation the institution can withdraw the application or accept the negative decision.
- › The decision regarding the institutional audit in the Netherlands can be threefold: *positive, conditionally positive or negative*. A positive decision entitles the institution to apply for LPA for all its programmes. A *conditionally positive* decision requires the institution to repair the deficits within one year. A *negative* decision is in force for three years, in which period all planned assessments of programmes have to be executed according to the framework for an EPA. The institutional audit in Flanders will not be concluded with a final decision; in the first round it is a learning experience, aiming at quality enhancement only.

NVAO implemented several procedures and processes to improve the consistency of its decision making. For an overview, see chapter 3.3.

A formal follow-up procedure is not included in the accreditation system. However such a procedure has become common practice, as described in chapter 3.6.

Self-evaluation

Both the previous Dutch and current Flemish criteria were reviewed as compliant with the ESG in 2007. Programme assessment and accreditation in the new system focus on the content of the curricula and on the achieved learning outcomes. Flanders and the Netherlands are at the forefront in this respect, as this focus is not common in the European higher education area. NVAO expects that the institutional audit will be a strong incentive for further development of effective internal quality assurance on an institutional level, which will positively influence the quality of individual programmes.

The new Dutch system gives NVAO additional powers which will improve the effectiveness of its operation. NVAO believes that the recovery period and the power to award a conditional initial accreditation are effective tools for improvement of the system. NVAO's authority to appoint (and reimburse) panels in the Netherlands and the reintroduction of the cluster assessment approach in Dutch higher education are other important improvements. In the new accreditation system NVAO's influence on the quality of panels has improved and that is of major importance for the quality of the system as a whole. In Flanders NVAO's influence on the panel composition has improved as well. The VLUHR will only decide on the composition of assessment panels after an NVAO advice.

Judgement

NVAO complies with the standard.

4.8 / Accountability procedures

Agencies should have in place procedures for their own accountability.

4.8.1 / Appeal procedures

Facts and findings

Both in the Netherlands and Flanders, institutions can lodge an appeal against (initial) accreditation decisions taken by NVAO. Although formal appeal procedures differ in both countries, the principles behind them are to a large extent similar. The main steps in the procedure in both countries are described below.

- > Prior to taking a final decision concerning an application for (initial) accreditation, NVAO will inform the institution about its 'intended decision'. The institution then has two weeks to respond. Subsequently, NVAO takes its final decision.
- > An institution can lodge an internal appeal against a NVAO decision. To handle internal appeals, NVAO has set up an appeals commission that provides advice to NVAO on which NVAO will take its decision.
- > If the decision on an internal appeal is negative, the institution can lodge an external appeal against this decision with the Administrative Jurisdiction Department of the Council of State [*Afdeling bestuursrechtspraak van de Raad van State*] in the Netherlands. In Flanders, institutions can lodge an external appeal with the Flemish Government and finally with the Council of State of Belgium [*Raad van State*].

Since the start of the accreditation system, NVAO has received nine internal appeals in the Netherlands. One appeal has been granted. In Flanders there were seven cases of internal appeal up to now. One appeal was granted, two were rejected and four were partly granted, but did not change NVAO's final decision after a new assessment by a panel.

At the time of writing, four external appeals have been lodged against a decision of NVAO in the Netherlands. One external appeal has been granted on procedural reasons. The others were refused. In Flanders no external appeals have been lodged.

Self-evaluation

The internal appeals procedures are set up satisfactorily. In the Netherlands, they have proven to function effectively. In Flanders, a new Procedure Regulation has been adapted in 2011 after an evaluation by the NVAO board and the appeals commission. The adaptations concern the terms of appointment of the members of the commission, the specific competences of the experts in the commission and the decision rules concerning its advice, in which it is now clearly stated that the appeals commission cannot change the scores on its own, but only accept the appeal and advise to start a new assessment on the identified problematic standards.

4.8.2 / Internal quality assurance

Facts and findings

From the outset, NVAO has developed a system for its internal quality assurance (IQA). Initially, this system had a thematic rather than a structural approach. Further development and the recommendations of the review committee of 2007 led

NVAO to focus on structuring its internal quality assurance (IQA).

Starting points of the NVAO IQA system

NVAO has developed a system for internal quality assurance that:

- > applies the criteria of the EFQM-model for an integrated approach concerning the organisation and its working processes;^{27>}
 - > facilitates frequent evaluation of the results and a structured plan for improvement (by following the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle);
 - > is transparent, simple and non-bureaucratic through the application of a limited number of instruments;
 - > provides the basis for an external (international) evaluation by the adoption of international standards in the development of the internal quality assurance system;
- stimulates involvement of all staff members, and in addition; guarantees involvement of all stakeholders by means of an open dialogue with these stakeholders.

Elaboration of the system

NVAO distinguishes thirteen quality areas within the internal quality assurance system: (1) Strategy, Policy and Leadership, (2-3)(Initial) Accreditation – including Research Master's Programmes, (4) International Affairs, (5) Communication, (6) Legal Affairs, (7) Support Services, (8) Additional Tasks, (9) Internal Quality Assurance, (10) Human Resources, (11) General Services, (12) Finances and (13) ICT.

The system can be summarized as follows. For each quality area, strategic objectives and targets are formulated on a two-year basis. A renewed quality scheme^{28>} based on the strategic goals guides the process in every area. At least every two years, evaluation data are gathered systematically by each quality area working group. An integral evaluation scheme^{29>} has been developed to coordinate all NVAO's evaluation activities. Stakeholders can be questioned efficiently in this way. The evaluations are prepared by the quality coordinator of the specific quality area. At the end of the two year period a report of progress is produced for every quality area (attachment 7 contains an example). Primary processes (Accreditation, Initial Accreditation and International Affairs) are subject to a more thorough

^{27>} EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Management) developed a non-prescriptive framework for organisational management systems and designed for helping organisations in their drive towards being more competitive. The Model is regularly reviewed and refined: the last update was published in 2010.

^{28>} attachment 6

^{29>} attachment 8

evaluation than other processes. The IQA group facilitates the process and steers the evaluations for the whole organisation. Every two years, after completion of the quality cycle, a quality report is drawn up, based on an evaluation per quality area. The next quality report will be available in 2012.

Accountability

NVAO publishes its annual report every Spring. In the annual report NVAO presents its operational and financial results and activities of the previous year.

Evaluation

The integral evaluation scheme structures NVAO's IQA evaluation approach, and consists of written and verbal activities. Important NVAO evaluation structures / activities are:

- > The periodic meeting with the Advisory Council (three times a year).
- > The periodic meetings of the two- and four-party platforms in Flanders: the Flemish cabinet and higher education departement with NVAO (three times a year) and VLIR, VLHORA, the Flemish cabinet, the Flemish HE department and NVAO (three times a year).
- > The periodic meetings of the Dutch ministry and NVAO (approx. ten times a year) and the quality assurance agencies in the Netherlands (plenary twice a year, bilateral once a year);
- > Written evaluation of procedures initial accreditation;
- > Verbal evaluation of the procedure institutional audit and the accreditation procedures of the same institution.
- > Yearly survey of the external communication;
- > Yearly survey of international activities;
- > Yearly staff meeting to discuss the realisations of previous objectives and plans and formulate the new objectives within the PDCA-cycle of NVAO's internal quality assurance.

Substantial evaluation activities in recent years were:

- > The evaluation of the accreditation system in the first phase in Netherlands and Flanders and the pilots to prepare the second phase;
- > A visit of NVAO to all Flemish higher education institutions in 2011 to discuss all issues regarding (initial) accreditation processes as far as NVAO is involved. The results were presented in the document *Evaluatieve gesprekken in Vlaanderen*;^{30>}
- > An extensive survey of the staff's satisfaction in 2011.

Improvements in recent years

A number of substantial improvements in NVAO's operation, achieved in recent years, are listed here.

- > (Initial) Accreditation
 - A new and evolved accreditation system in the Netherlands (2011) and expected in Flanders (2013).
 - Certification of about 185 external secretaries (2011 and 2012).
- > Internationalisation
 - The certificate distinctive feature Internationalisation, which was developed and tested in a pilot (2010), leading to a new framework regarding the distinctive feature Internationalisation (2011).
 - Six agreements with international partners regarding mutual recognition of accreditation decisions (2007).
 - The implementation of Crossroads (2009).
- > Information Communication Technology
 - A new document management (DMS – RICOH, 2011) and a new document administration system Easydoc (2008).
- > Communication
 - A new NVAO website (2011), intranet (2009) and the quality magazine Q&A (2010).
- > Human Resource Management
 - A Staff satisfaction survey and competence profiles for staff members (2011).
- > Strategy
 - A new Strategic Policy Statement 2012-2016 (2012).
- > Organisation
 - The introduction of the function and rank of thematic coordinator, regular meetings with the director (2010).

Self-evaluation

Since about three years NVAO employs a systematic evaluation system. All core assessment procedures are subject to periodic evaluation. The evaluation activities are on track and sometimes adjusted because of efficiency reasons. NVAO intended to develop a lean and, especially, practical IQA system. The current system is a result of this approach. In the opinion of NVAO an IQA system has only significant value if supported by a strong quality culture. Motivated, critical and proactive staff may even be more important to achieve NVAO's objectives. Therefore, NVAO invests in the quality of 'people and processes'.

Judgement

NVAO complies with the standard.

^{30>} Evaluation meetings in Flanders: a thematical summary of facts and considerations of NVAO, 21 October 2011, [*Evaluatieve gesprekken in Vlaanderen: thematische samenvatting van de bevindingen en overwegingen van de NVAO*].

Point(s) of attention

- › Legal procedures are time and energy consuming, as was proved in the past years on several occasions. During an appeal procedure accreditation of a programme is suspended according to the law, which causes substantial uncertainty for all involved and undermines the meaning of accreditation.
- › For NVAO (supporting) staff members the importance of their own contribution to IQA is not always clear. Better communication and more investment in commitment are necessary.

4.9 / Miscellaneous

ENQA criterion 8 I

The agency pays careful attention to its declared principles at all times, and ensures both that its requirements and processes are managed professionally and that its judgements and decisions are reached in consistent manner, even if the judgements are formed by different groups.

NVAO is of the opinion that it has proven to be compliant with this criterion in the chapters three and four.

ENQA criterion 8 II

If the agency makes formal quality assurance decisions, or conclusions which have formal consequences, it should have an appeals procedure. The nature and form of the appeals procedure should be determined in the light of the constitution of the agency.

NVAO is of the opinion that it has proven to be compliant with this criterion in the chapter 4.8.1.

ENQA criterion 8 III

The agency is willing to contribute actively to the aims of ENQA.

NVAO is of the opinion that it has proven to be compliant with this criterion, especially in chapter 8.4.

Chapter

5

Strengths
and points of
attention
regarding
NVAO's
operation

In this chapter NVAO's position in the accreditation system in the Netherlands and Flanders is concluded by discussing the main strengths of NVAO's operation and the main points of attention. This summary is based on the three angles mentioned in the introduction:

- > NVAO as organisation within the new accreditation system;
- > NVAO's compliance with the ESG resp. Parts 2 and 3 and;
- > A first reflection on the new accreditation system in the Netherlands, which is presented separately in chapter 7.

5.1 / NVAO as organisation within the new accreditation system

Strengths

Respected

NVAO is a respected player with substantial impact on quality and quality assurance in higher education in the Netherlands, Flanders and in the European higher education area. As supervisory body in higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders NVAO holds an influential position. NVAO's initiating role in the evaluation and development of the accreditation system in the period 2008-2010 is just an example of its critical, self-reflecting, flexible, cooperative and transparent way of functioning, which have all contributed to the respect for NVAO in the eyes of all stakeholders.

Its major contribution to the European Network of Quality Assurance (ENQA) and the European Consortium of Accreditation (ECA) are just two examples of NVAO's significant international contribution and NVAO is firmly positioned world-wide as a secretary of INQAAHE.

Flexible and pro-active

Since 2005 NVAO has completed a large number of additional tasks as listed in chapter 8.5. All these tasks were assigned to NVAO on request of the Dutch and Flemish ministers. In completing these tasks NVAO showed not only its flexibility, but it also rapidly augmented its expertise in the field of quality assurance in Dutch and Flemish higher education. The pro-active character of NVAO came to the fore during the evaluation of the previous accreditation system and the preparation of the new system in the Netherlands and Flanders (see chapter 7).

Thanks to NVAO's (inter)national position new developments in quality assurance are quickly recognized, evaluated and sometimes transferred to the accreditation systems or frameworks in the Netherlands and Flanders. The introduction of the institutional audit and the focus on learning outcomes are two examples of how NVAO is constantly learning from new developments. The clear difference between intended and achieved learning outcomes in the new accreditation frame-

work is a good example of NVAO's pole-position in the new developments.

Cooperation

NVAO communicates and cooperates regularly in an open and transparent way with all stakeholders by organising or participating in conferences, pilots and workshops in Dutch and Flemish higher education. New developments and instruments are always implemented in cooperation with the stakeholders through pilots, as has been done in the development of the new accreditation system.

Points of attention

Administrative burden

The administrative burden of the accreditation system is an important issue among stakeholders, especially the institutions. In the acceptance of the new system all parties agreed on a reduction of 25% in administrative burden in programme accreditation. Now it is up to all to monitor actively whether this aim will be achieved. NVAO has to play a leading role here. NVAO should also monitor whether the aim of a decrease in additional assessments and additional questions will be achieved in the coming years.

Consistency

Considering the large number of applications from the Netherlands and Flanders every year, consistency in assessment and its own decisions is a permanent issue for NVAO and the panels. In this respect NVAO will continue to support the quality assurance agencies, the (NVAO) panels and to monitor its internal processes. A new element in the accreditation system in the Netherlands and, possibly, in Flanders too, is the judgement of the programme on a four-point scale, which makes consistency even more important. The new evaluation matrix and the new internal organisational structure of NVAO are supposed to be of help in its strive towards consistency.

Additional tasks and time limits

Over the years NVAO has completed a large number of additional tasks, which have sometimes caused workflow problems. As a result time limits of regular applications could not be respected more than once. In alignment with the Dutch and Flemish ministry NVAO must set priorities to better manage its primary tasks and additional assignments.

Added value of binational nature

Because of its binational nature NVAO tries to contribute significantly to Dutch – Flemish cooperation in higher education. But an important objective from the start in 2003,

the mutual recognition of degrees, has not been achieved so far. This is disappointing, although mutual recognition is up to both governments and not to NVAO. NVAO has to look for other opportunities to strengthen the cooperation in higher education between the two countries in the near future.

5.2 / NVAO's compliance with the ESG resp. Parts 2 and 3

NVAO is convinced it complies with the European Standards and Guidelines, Parts two and three, from ENQA. NVAO leaves it to the review panel to judge on NVAO's degree of compliance with each ESG and in the final conclusion.

Regarding two standards of the ESG NVAO would like to add the following considerations.

ESG 2.6: Follow-up procedures

The accreditation system in the Netherlands and Flanders does not include a formal follow-up procedure. NVAO is confident it fully complies with what it believes is the core of the guideline in this respect – the transparent evaluation of the implementation of recommendations made by review panels, also in the case of positive accreditation decisions. In case of negative or conditional positive decisions of NVAO the follow-up procedure is clear, as is outlined in chapter 3.6. In case of an unconditional positive decision it is the responsibility of the institution and/or the programme to implement the recommendations of the panel. In the following assessment and accreditation procedure the panel will assess whether the recommendations are implemented adequately. Accreditation decisions are taken periodically. In this kind of system a formal approach regarding the implementation of recommendations of accredited programmes cannot operate well. For reasons of trust this should be left to the accredited programme.

The new accreditation system in the Netherlands offers the possibility of conditionally satisfactory in the procedures for institutional audit and initial accreditation. In addition, NVAO decides on the length of the recovery period, on the basis of a recovery plan that guarantees the follow-up of recommendations.

ESG 2.8: System wide analyses

Up to now NVAO completed several comparative analyses within a cluster or domain, as is described in chapter 3.8 and therefore NVAO complies strictly speaking with this standard. This does not preclude that NVAO has to work on implementing its new policy regarding system-wide and comparative analyses.

A good step is the system-wide evaluation in the Netherlands and Flanders of the operation of the accreditation system in the second phase.

Overall conclusion

NVAO is of the opinion that it is compliant with the Standards and Guidelines of ENQA, while it is aware of points of improvement regarding its work processes.

Chapter 6

Introduction
to the higher
education
systems in
the
Netherlands
and Flanders



This chapter gives an outline of the higher education systems in the Netherlands and Flanders. First a description will be given of the types of institutions and programmes, and secondly some key figures on higher education will be quoted.

6.1 / Higher education in the Netherlands

Two types of institutions offer higher education programmes: universities of applied sciences (41)^{31>} [*hogescholen*] and universities (14), which both are publicly funded. They can offer programmes with an academic or a professional orientation. However, academic programmes are mostly offered by universities and professional programmes by universities of applied sciences.

Besides these regular public institutions, there are recognised private institutions in higher education [*Rechtspersonen voor hoger onderwijs*]. Recognised private institutions do not receive public funding. However, after having completed the special procedure *Legal body higher education*, these institutions are allowed to apply for and to offer accredited bachelor's and master's programmes. Currently about 60 recognised private institutions offer accredited higher education programmes in the Netherlands.

Students who wish to enter higher education generally need a degree issued by one of the following types of secondary education:

1. VWO (pre-academic education), the highest level of secondary education, required for being admitted to universities;
2. HAVO (higher general secondary education) and
3. MBO-4 (the highest level of middle professional education): both give access to enter higher professional education.

In the Netherlands, higher education consists of three cycles: bachelor, master and PhD level. Bachelor's and master's programmes can be offered by universities of applied sciences, universities and recognised institutions. Only universities are allowed by law to award PhD degrees.

Table 2

Orientation / level	Bachelor	Master	Research Master	Doctorate
> Programmes with an academic orientation	wo-bachelor	wo-master	wo-master	PhD
> Programmes with a professional orientation	hbo-bachelor	hbo-master		

31> Universities of professional education of significant size present themselves abroad as Universities of Applied Sciences. Dutch professional higher education counts 41 such institutions.

In the near future a new degree will be introduced: the Associate Degree as a short cycle part of the bachelor's programme with professional orientation (expected in 2013). Currently Associate Degree programmes are offered as pilots.

6.2 / Recent developments in higher education in the Netherlands

In 2011, the Dutch Government issued a new strategic statement for higher education^{32>}, which emphasizes the need for a more ambitious study climate in higher education, with a focus on excellence. The new strategy imposed a number of requirements on institutes in higher education. Universities need to reinforce the relation between research and education and develop a sharply distinguished profile. Universities of applied sciences are required to focus on the development of research and entrepreneurial skills in the programmes, on upgrading the achieved learning outcomes of the professional bachelor's programmes and a master's degree for all educational staff in 2020 (already 80% in 2016).

A National Qualification Framework for the entire educational sector (NLQF) was finalized in the Netherlands in 2011. This followed the development and acceptance of the European Quality Framework in 2008. As a result of the Bologna agreement, the National Qualification Framework for higher education (NQF HE) was approved in 2009. It is compatible with the Qualification framework of the European Higher Education Area (QF EHEA). NVAO monitors the NQF higher education framework in the Netherlands.

6.3 / Higher education in Flanders

In Flanders, higher education is provided by institutions registered in HOR. Only these institutions can offer bachelor's and master's programmes. There are two categories:

- > Statutory registered institutions. These were already recognised by the Flemish or Belgian government before the introduction of the bachelor's and master's degree system in 2003. All these institutions receive public funding for education and research. There are four different types of statutory registered institutions: universities (6), university colleges (21), postgraduate institutions and protestant faculties.
- > Registered institutions. Since 2004 some new providers have successfully completed a procedure for registration and, consequently, were recognised as higher education institutions by the Flemish government.

32> [*Kwaliteit in verscheidenheid, Strategische agenda hoger onderwijs, onderzoek en wetenschap, Ministerie van OCW, Den Haag, augustus 2011*].

Universities have the authority to award academically-oriented bachelor's and master's degrees and doctoral degrees. University colleges have the authority to award professionally-oriented bachelor's degrees and in association^{33>} with a university academically-oriented bachelor's and master's degrees. The Flemish government intends to incorporate these programmes within universities. The Flemish system does not offer a professional master's degree.

Access to higher education

In Flanders, the following secondary school diplomas or certificates give access to higher education:

- > secondary school leaving diploma
- > certificate of short higher education courses with full curriculum or;
- > a diploma or certificate recognised as equivalent under a law, decree, European directive or other international agreement.

Higher education institutions may adopt special admission requirements to admit persons who cannot meet the general admission requirement. These individual admission decisions must be based on: the individual education level of the student, humanitarian grounds; medical, psychological or social grounds, assessed by the higher education institution.

Higher education in Flanders consists of three cycles: bachelor's, master's and PhD level.

Table 3

Orientation / level	Bachelor	Master	Doctorate
> Academically oriented Programmes	academische gerichte bachelor-opleiding	master master na master	PhD
> Professionally-oriented Programmes	professioneel gerichte bachelor-opleiding bachelor na bachelor		

A new degree has been introduced and will come into effect in the near future, which is linked to the short cycle programme HBO5. Like the Associate degree programme in the Netherlands, HBO5 is a short cycle programme on level 5 of the European Qualification Framework.

33> An association is a legal body in which the cooperation between a university and one or more university colleges is officially established.

6.4 / Recent developments in higher education in Flanders

Recent developments in Flemish higher education are partly directed by the policy statement 2009-2014 of the Minister of Education, Youth, Equal opportunities and Brussels^{34>}. From this statement several pending issues and new initiatives in Flemish higher education can be derived.

- > A major topic in Flemish higher education for years is the 'academisation'^{35>} of academic programmes in university colleges. In this regard it can be mentioned that the academic programmes in arts will be offered by specific Schools of Arts within the university colleges. The legislation allowing these changes should be ready in 2012.
- > An ongoing debate in Flanders is the extension of academic master's programmes with a duration of one year to a length of two years. Recently (November 2011) the universities and university colleges offered their proposals to the Flemish Minister. A final decision remains to be taken in April 2012. The institutions have to finance the development of these programmes for the longer duration themselves, because the government will not offer extra funding.
- > A related topic is the discussion about the reduction of the programme Medical training to six years (now seven) in order to be equivalent to similar programmes in other European countries.
- > A recent and significant development in Europe is the growing importance of short cycle higher education. In Flanders the HBO5 programmes can be provided in the future by university colleges or regional centres for adult education. These programmes are considered to lower thresholds for enrolment in higher education. NVAO supported the preparation of HBO5 by organising a pilot in 2010 to assess potential HBO5 programmes. As a result of the pilot a report of learning effects^{36>} was produced and discussed with all stakeholders.
- > To increase participation in higher education new arrangements for disadvantaged groups will be created.
- > A last objective is related to Internationalisation. In 2016 at least 15% of the graduates of bachelor's and master's programmes should have completed a learning experience abroad of at least three months. Either a practical training in the professional field or a couple of courses or a part of a programme at a foreign institution for higher education.

34> Policy Statement 2009-2014 of the Flemish minister of Education, November 2009, [Beleidsnota 2009 - 2014, Onderwijs, Samen grenzen verleggen voor elk talent, Pascal Smet, Vlaams minister van Onderwijs, Jeugd, Gelijke Kansen en Brussel].

35> Academisation is the development of certain programmes from university colleges to academic programmes within an association, which is a legal body in which the cooperation between a university and one or more university colleges is officially established.

36> Pilot report Learning effects HBO5, NVAO, December 2010, [Leereffectenrapport proefprojecten HBO5, NVAO].

National Qualification Framework and Domain Specific Learning Outcomes

The National Qualification framework of higher education (NQF HE) was approved by the Flemish government on 18 July 2008. Related to the Flemish NQF HE are the domain specific learning outcomes, which are developed by all suppliers of the same kind of programme and which must be validated by NVAO for the levels 6 and 7 of NQF. Level 5 is validated by AKOV^{37>}. NVAO was an observer in the process of making the manual on how to write domain specific learning outcomes. As a result, NVAO produced a procedure concerning validating such learning outcomes of new and existing programmes on levels 6 and 7. Validated learning outcomes are automatically recognised by the Flemish NQF and replace the prepared domain specific frameworks by assessment committees.

The National Qualification Framework (*Het Vlaams Kwalificatie-raamwerk*) for the entire education sector in Flanders was launched on 30 November 2009. An important step, because application of the NQF makes it possible to compare all individual, acquired qualifications and competences in educational programmes, jobs and other societal activities. The NQF is an important instrument in lifelong learning. NVAO has been involved in the development of the NQF and was a member of the Steering Group of the procedure that connected the NQF to the EQF.

6.5 / Overview of the Dutch and Flemish degree programme

The Dutch and Flemish types of programmes described in the preceding paragraphs are shown in table 4.

Table 4 / Matrix of the degree programmes in higher education of the Netherlands and Flanders

Level - EQF Orientation	Associate degree / HBO5 (5) ^{38>}	Bachelor (6)	Master (7)
> Academic orientation (the Netherlands and Flanders)	-	180 ECTS	60 or 120 or 180 or 240 ^{39>} ECTS
> Professional orientation (the Netherlands)	120 ECTS	240 ECTS	60 to 90 ECTS
> Professional orientation (Flanders)	90 or 120 ECTS	180 ECTS Advanced: 60 ECTS	

^{37>} AKOV [Agentschap Kwaliteit Onderwijs en Vorming] is the new agency within the department of education to deal with (recognition of) qualifications and quality from EQF level 1 to 5.

6.6 / Some key figures in higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders

From 2005 to 2010 enrolment in higher education in the Netherlands grew from about 560.000 to 635.000 students, in Flanders enrolment grew from about 160.000 to 195.000 students in this period.

In 2005 35% of the labour force between 27 and 34 years old in the Netherlands held a higher education degree, in Flanders this percentage was higher at 40%. Both countries performed better than average in Europe. Short programmes in higher education in both countries are not included in the percentages. These percentages are expected to grow further^{40>}. Table 5 shows several figures at a glance.

Table 5 / Overview of (rounded) key figures of higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders (2009-2010)

Variables / Countries / Total	The Netherlands	Flanders	Total
> Inhabitants	16.750.000	6.250.000	23.000.000
> Universities	14	6	20
> Universities of applied sciences (NL) and University colleges (FL)	41	21	62
> Recognised private institutions (NL) and Registered institutions (FL)	60	7	
> Other statutory registered institutions (FL)		5	
> Programmes	3500	1400	4900
> Number of students	635.000	195.000	830.000
> Professional education	400.000	90.000	490.000
> Academic education	235.000	105.000	340.000
> Male vs. Female students	48 vs. 52%	46 vs. 54%	

Attachment 9 contains these figures more in detail.

Sources

Decreet van 4 April 2003 betreffende de herstructurering van het hoger onderwijs; Flemish education in figures, 2009-2010, Flemish authorities Education and Training policy area; www.hbo-raad.nl; www.vsnu.nl; www.vlir.be; www.vlhora.be; www.nvaovet.net; Jaarboek Onderwijs in cijfers CBS, 2009, 2010 en 2011

^{38>} Will be formalised in the Netherlands and Flanders in the next years

^{39>} Just some medical programmes have a study load of 180 or 240 EC. In the near future 90 ECTS will be possible in FL.

^{40>} OESO, Education at a glance, 2007.

Chapter

7

The external
quality

assurance in
the

Netherlands
and Flanders

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The current accreditation system in the Netherlands and Flanders is described and evaluated below.

Until the end of 2010 the accreditation system in the Netherlands was based on programme accreditation, peer review and the opportunity for programmes to apply for distinctive (quality) features. In Flanders this system is still current until the end of the academic year 2012-2013. From 1 January 2011 a new accreditation system came into force in the Netherlands. It is expected that a roughly similar system will be implemented in Flanders in the academic year 2013-2014.

At the core of both the previous and the new system is the assessment and accreditation of programmes. Institutions prepare a self-evaluation report and quality assurance agencies assess the existing programmes of higher education institutions on the basis of the NVAO accreditation framework and procedures. Most agencies apply their own procedural handbook or protocol for the assessment procedure. In Flanders, the institution applies for accreditation of a programme with NVAO, submitting the assessment report of the panel produced and published by the evaluating agency. In the Netherlands the assessment report is published after completion of the accreditation procedure. NVAO checks the quality of the assessment procedure and the quality of the programme according to the assessment report. If this report leaves questions unanswered, NVAO requests additional investigation. Finally NVAO takes an accreditation decision.

The initial accreditation procedure is carried out entirely by NVAO, appointing the panels that assess a new programme on the basis of the framework for initial accreditation and submit their report to NVAO.

Before developing a new system in the Netherlands and Flanders NVAO decided to thoroughly evaluate the previous accreditation system in both countries. After having discussed the experiences on accreditation with the external stakeholders in 2007, NVAO proposed a draft model for the new system, combining institutional audits and programme accreditation. The draft model was discussed during an international seminar in January 2008 attended by partner accreditation organisations in Europe that already gained experience with a mixed accreditation model of institutional audit and programme assessment. Subsequently NVAO discussed the draft of the new system with external stakeholders in Spring 2008 and started a pilot to test the draft in Autumn 2008. The pilot consisted of an institutional audit and a limited assessment of a programme (focusing on the quality of content and the achieved learning outcomes) of the same

institution. Nine institutions participated in this pilot, six from the Netherlands and three from Flanders. The pilot was an important learning experience for the institutions involved and for NVAO. The results were presented and discussed on special conferences for all stakeholders organised by NVAO in March-April 2009. Afterwards NVAO presented a definite proposal to the ministers of Education in the Netherlands and Flanders.

Based on the experiences gained during the pilot and the support of stakeholders a new system of external quality assurance was introduced in Dutch higher education on 1 January 2011 (one year later than intended). In Flanders the new system will start in the academic year of study 2013-2014.

Besides the use of less but more open standards, another novelty of the new system is the institutional audit. In the Netherlands an audit committee assesses whether the institution is 'in control' of the quality and the achieved learning outcomes of its programmes. In order to answer this question the audit committee assesses the adequacy of the strategy, policy and educational processes in the institution. During the institutional audit at least two audit trails are executed. Institutions that pass an institutional audit successfully or conditionally with an improvement assignment are entitled to submit *limited programme assessment* (LPA). In the case of a conditional decision, the institution has to comply with a limited set of conditions within three years. If a negative decision has been taken, all institution's programmes that were assessed in the limited mode must undergo an additional, extended assessment within one year. Institutions that do not opt for an institutional audit can only submit application based on *extensive programme assessment* (EPA).

Flanders still has to decide about some elements of this system, but it seems clear already that the institutional review and LPA will be compulsory, although in the first round without formal consequences for the result of the institutional review. This first round is meant as an important learning exercise and will be evaluated mid-term (2017-18) and at the end (2021) in order to give time to work out the next accreditation system.

The new accreditation system offers more opportunities for institutions and programmes to acquire recognition for higher quality or a specific profile. In the Netherlands, the final judgement is based on a four-point scale (Excellent, Good, Sufficient and Insufficient); this scale is applicable both on the level of a study programme and on the level of the separate standards of the framework. The new accreditation

system contains a recovery period and an elaborated procedure for initial accreditation in the Netherlands; if a new programme is approved, NVAO can restrict the duration of the initial accreditation and subject it to conditions that have to be met within a fixed period.

The Flemish government still has to decide on the application of the four-point scale on the level of the study programme. An approved new programme is accredited for the length of the programme and two years (e.g. the duration of a professional bachelor programme is three years, so the period of approval is five years). And as mentioned earlier, a recovery period is already part of the Flemish accreditation system.

7.1 / Self-evaluation

The old and new accreditation systems both in the Netherlands and Flanders can be summarized in the table below.

Table 6

Item	Old system	New system NL	New system FL
> Accreditation unit	Study programme	Study programme	Study programme
> Quality assurance	Study programme	Institution	Institution
> # Standards	6 with 21 underlying aspects	LPA : 3 (open) EPA : 16 Institution : 5	Study programme : 3 (4) ^{41>} (open) Institution : 5
> Clustered assessment	No clustering (NL prof) Clustering (NL ac. & FL)	Clustered assessment of programmes	Clustered assessment of programmes
> Assessment organisation	Initial : NVAO Study programme : QAA	Initial : NVAO Study programme : NVAO orders QAA Institution : NVAO	Initial : NVAO Study programme: VLUHR ^{42>} or EQAR/foreign QAA Institution : NVAO
> Panel	Completely QAA-controlled	NVAO-controlled	QAA-controlled with NVAO advice
> Site visit	2 days	1 day+prep. meeting	day+prep. meeting
> Report	public	public	public
>	Possibility (not FL) to disapprove	Possibility to disapprove	Possibility to disapprove
> Recovery period	(not NL) Recovery period	Recovery period	Recovery period
> Doubt	Further information Executive arrangement (NL) Hearing (FL)	Further information Conditional accreditation	Further information
> Follow-up	Not official	After recovery period After conditional decision	After recovery period
> System-wide analysis	Only as additional and voluntary task	Together with inspection	Evaluation system-wide analyses in decree

41> Four standards for only registered institutions adding internal QA.

42> VLUHR [Vlaamse Universitaire en Hogescholenraad]. VLUHR is a merger organisation of the former quality assurance organisations of VLIR and VLHORA, which both are EQAR registered.

The previous accreditation system is generally accepted in both countries. The quite open frameworks are widely appreciated. These frameworks provide assessment panels with the required room to apply the peer review to its full extent. The system is built on programme accreditation, which is to the satisfaction of most stakeholders, especially the government and students.

On the other hand, the previous system shows some weaknesses as well. In the opinion of the institutions the administrative burden of programme accreditation is too high. For each programme common institutional aspects, like facilities and internal quality assurance, which are often managed at a higher level in the institution, had to be assessed separately. Such assessments were considered excessively formal and, as a consequence, educational staff felt less involved in the assessments.

NVAO never intended the frameworks and procedures to oblige programmes to produce a lot of documentation for the assessments. To the contrary, NVAO encourages the programmes to deliver concise self-evaluation reports supported by a limited number of appendices. Programme management often feels uncomfortable with a concise self-evaluation and compensate their uncertainty by producing heaps of documents for the panels.

Another weakness is the position of quality assurance agencies in the Netherlands. These agencies are private organisations that are commissioned by the institutions. This position has raised questions about the required independency of the agencies and their panels.

A complicating feature was the lack of a recovery period in the Netherlands under the previous system, which put the panels under extra pressure to formulate a positive assessment. The consequences of a negative assessment – cessation of public funding and no admission of new students – are very severe and can be fatal for a programme. As a consequence, some panels tended to write less convincing reports with a positive conclusion when assessing weak programmes.

In some cases NVAO had to carry out additional assessments to verify the panel assessment and the quality of the programme. Sometimes the panel report was rejected. It is obvious that additional assessments (or additional questions) are considered as administrative burden by the institutions. But to guarantee quality assurance NVAO had to apply these steps occasionally.

In the new accreditation frameworks, the institutional audit will focus on aspects that are defined at institutional level and includes organisational processes on programme level. Programme assessments will focus on content and results through the achieved learning outcomes. This combination should lead to a reduction in administrative burden. Institutional policy and processes within programmes are not repeatedly assessed in this model. The reintroduction of the cluster approach in the professional higher education sector in the Netherlands contributes to the consistency of the assessment of individual programmes. The introduction of a recovery period improves the objective judgement of the panels. The independent status and the quality of the panels has to improve as well, since the criteria are stricter, with a stronger focus on international and educational experience of the panelists. Moreover, in the near future the panels in the Netherlands will be commissioned by NVAO instead of by the institutions. The first indications of the effects of the new Dutch system are positive. NVAO already received a number of very well-written and well-argued reports and some with a negative judgement, which might be a first indication that panels pass stricter judgements, without the burden of a possible shutdown of the programme.

As mentioned, the previous system is still running in Flanders. New elements in the Dutch system are already part of the system in Flanders, such as a recovery period and the cluster approach in both sectors of professional and academic education. In the past the quality assurance agencies in Flanders were part of the umbrella organisations of the universities (VLIR) and the universities of applied sciences (VLHORA). But in 2011 these agencies merged into VLUHR (*Vlaamse Universiteiten en Hogescholenraad*) partly in order to perform their external quality assurance activities separated from the umbrella organizations VLIR and VLHORA. This separation should guarantee that the external quality assurance system operates independently from the umbrella organisations VLIR and VLHORA. Nevertheless in the new Flemish accreditation system institutions will also be able to work with foreign QAA's as long as these are EQAR-registered or recognized by the NVAO.

Procedures used by VLUHR are based upon the NVAO accreditation framework and procedures. The independence of the assessment committees is guaranteed by the Recognition committee [*Erkenningscommissie*] of the Flemish government. As this will be changed in the new accreditation system VLUHR will only decide on the composition of the assessment panel after an NVAO advice. VLUHR plays an important role in the composition of panels. As this organisation is leading in the programme assessment

process, the added value of NVAO in the accreditation process is not immediately clear for all institutions and this obliges NVAO to communicate clearly about its role in Flemish higher education.

NVAO organises periodic conferences and visits to improve the involvement and consent of the Flemish institutions. Both instruments were applied once again in autumn 2011 as NVAO organised its Flemish conference in November in Brussels and visited all institutions to evaluate the experiences of the institutions with NVAO. Both activities produced useful information to improve the operation of NVAO in Flanders and are explicitly included in NVAO's new strategic policy.

7.2 / Conclusion

NVAO has positive expectations about the results of the new accreditation system in the Netherlands and Flanders. Lessons are learned from the first accreditation cycle in both countries and are translated into an improved system that responds well to the needs and the current achieved level of internal quality assurance in the Dutch and Flemish institutions. The systems offer an adequate challenge for the institutions to work further on internal quality assurance on institutional and programme level.

The systems in the Netherlands and in Flanders will be quite equivalent, with some clear differences, but after all and in practice more similar than in the first cycle. As a result of the distrust that followed recent quality incidents in Dutch professional higher education, the initial openness of the new Dutch system was restricted by additional requirements. In Flanders the involvement of the higher education department in the Bologna transparency agenda resulted in an effort to restrict the openness of the standards with underlying specific criteria and proofs. The talks to come to a consensus on the Flemish framework opened up the standards again. The first audit reports from the Netherlands demonstrate that these audits have a considerably wider scope than just the technicalities of the institutional internal quality assurance system. The audits start from the strategic policy of the institution, which is precisely the focus of the Flemish audits. Next to the recovery period it will be possible to reject an assessment report both in the Netherlands and Flanders. Remaining issues in both countries are the reduction of administrative burden in the system and the consistency and fairness of the panels.

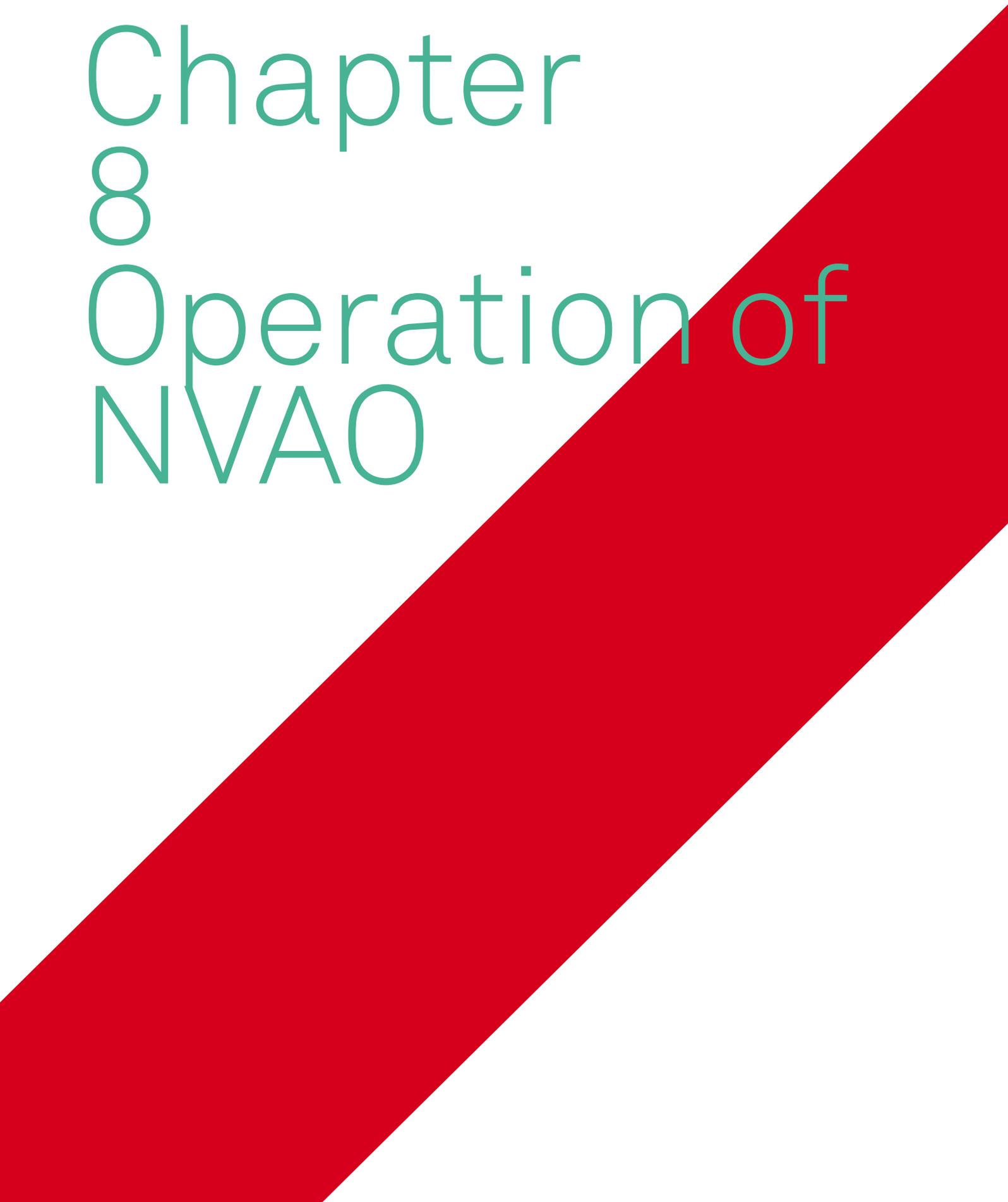
Even before the new Dutch system was introduced, the Netherlands and Flanders have learned from each other for the better. In the Netherlands the test of the macro-efficiency

of a new programme has been placed before the assessment of initial accreditation, following the example of the order of these procedures in Flanders. The other way around, Flanders has learned from the Netherlands to introduce open standards and to move the authority to impose a recovery period from the government to the NVAO. The differences that will remain in the new accreditation system are the result of the different degrees of trust in the quality of higher education and of cultural differences. Yet, the ultimate aims of the systems are similar, and the differences provide interesting insights and deserve being investigated in order to learn from each other.

Chapter

8

Operation of
NVAO



8.1 / Quantitative results

The quantitative results of the accreditation process in the Netherlands and Flanders until 1 January 2012, are presented in table 7.

Table 7

Accreditation results	The Netherlands	Flanders
> Number of applications	3982	864
> (Initial) accredited programmes		
- Regular	3385	772
- Research Masters	233	
> Negative decision		
- Regular programmes	21	38
- Research Masters	7	
> Panel report disapproved		
- Regular programmes	17	
- Research Masters		
> Application withdrawn		
- Regular programmes	274	54
- Research Masters	45	
Total - Not accredited	364	92

As mentioned, the first phase of the accreditation system in Flanders runs till the end of the academic year of study 2012-2013.

Apart from the activities concerning accreditation, NVAO received more than 400 applications for additional tasks.

These tasks are specified in attachment 2.

Results regarding the internationalisation task are presented in chapter 8.4.

8.2 / The assignment of NVAO

The primary assignment of NVAO is to accredit existing programmes in higher education (accreditation) and to assess new programmes (initial accreditation) in the Netherlands and Flanders. NVAO can be requested to carry out additional tasks by the Ministers of higher education in both countries if these assignments support or supplement NVAO's primary assignment.⁴³ Secondly NVAO is assigned to play an important role in internationalisation (see chapter 8.4).

8.3 / The treaty between the Netherlands and Flanders

NVAO is established as a binational accreditation organisation by treaty in 2003 by the Dutch and Flemish Education ministers. The Treaty assigns the tasks of NVAO, its form of administration and its supervision.

At the time of writing (2011) adjustment of the Treaty to recent developments is prepared. Since two years the ministers of Education from the Netherlands and Flanders discuss the possibility of incorporating the mutual recognition of diplomas in the Treaty. A long expected and natural step would be finalized in that case.

Another reason to adjust the Treaty is the recent constitutional merge of the Caribbean islands Bonaire, Eustatius and Saba with the Netherlands. Consequently, NVAO will be authorized to act on these islands in the near future.

8.4 / International assignment of NVAO

From the outset in 2003, NVAO was assigned the task to play an important role in internationalisation. In order to fulfil this international role adequately, NVAO formulated five long-term objectives that outline its international policy. These objectives are:

- > Playing an active membership role in international networks of accreditation and quality assurance organisations (INQAAHE, ENQA, ECA).
- > Facilitating the profiling of the Dutch and Flemish accreditation and higher education systems so as to strengthen the international position of the Dutch and Flemish higher education institutions.
- > Cooperating with other accreditation organisations in order to achieve mutual recognition of accreditation decisions.
- > Contributing to the creation of a European Qualifications Area where the competent authorities automatically recognise degrees from accredited programmes and institutions.
- > Pro-actively following up on international developments in quality assurance and higher education.

The department Internationalisation of NVAO works continuously on achieving these objectives. Operational targets and activities relating to each objective are formulated in an action plan.

⁴³> The Treaty, page 3.

Below the activities of the department are described shortly.

1. Active membership of international networks in accreditation and quality assurance

NVAO is an active member of three international networks of accreditation and quality assurance organisations:

- › International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE)
- › European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)
- › European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA)

International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE)

INQAAHE is a worldwide organisation for quality assurance agencies (www.INQAAHE.org). NVAO coordinates the INQAAHE Secretariat and the NVAO Vice-Chairman is as Secretary also Board member of INQAAHE. In the autumn of 2011 NVAO has organised a INQAAHE seminar jointly with ENQA. Almost 120 participants from all continents were present at this three-day seminar in Brussels.

European Association for Quality Assurance in higher education (ENQA)

Members of ENQA are quality assurance agencies from countries that are party to the Bologna process (www.enqa.net). The NVAO Chairman is also a ENQA Board member. NVAO participates in the annual General Assembly and is as a rule present at ENQA Workshops. Several NVAO policy advisers have followed the ENQA reviewers training and presented at ENQA workshops or seminars. From 2007 to 2011 NVAO was represented in the steering group of the Internal Quality Assurance network of ENQA. The yearly seminar of this network was organised by NVAO in The Hague in 2009.

European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA)

The ECA network currently consists of sixteen accreditation organisations from ten European countries (www.eaconsortium.net). NVAO coordinates the ECA Secretariat since the start in 2003. The NVAO Chairman is also Vice-Chair of ECA. NVAO participates in all ECA events, including the annual plenary ECA Workshop, and plays an active role in the four working groups of ECA, chairing two of them. The winter seminars of ECA were organised by NVAO in the past years.

The ECA projects TEAM II (2008-2010), JOGAR (since 2010) and E-Train (since October 2010) are coordinated by NVAO.

2. Facilitating the international profiling of the Dutch and Flemish accreditation and higher education systems

NVAO representatives took part in numerous international conferences and workshops in which they provide active contributions. The Dutch-Flemish accreditation system and the binational cooperation clearly set an example for other countries, considering the large number of international delegations that visited NVAO in the recent years. In 2010 and 2011 NVAO welcomed delegations from 31 countries from all over the world (Armenia, Aruba, China, Curaçao, Cyprus, Denmark, East-Timor, Ethiopia, Finland, France, Germany, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kirgizstan, Lithuania, Norway, Peru, Poland, Russia, Saudi-Arabia, Slovakia, South Korea, Suriname, Sweden, Switzerland, Tadzjikistan, Taiwan, Trinidad and Tobago).

NVAO participated in the international project on learning outcomes CoRe2 and has presented its views and approached at international seminars and in the ECA Working Group 4. In 2009 NVAO prepared a framework for a distinctive feature internationalisation, which was tested in 2010 in a pilot in which 12 institutions and 21 programmes in the Netherlands and Flanders participated.

3. Mutual recognition of accreditation decisions

Mutual recognition of accreditation decisions is one of NVAO's main objectives. Mutual recognition of accreditation decisions facilitates the recognition of degrees and international mobility.

NVAO signed six bilateral agreements on mutual recognition of accreditation decisions with agencies in other European countries and one multilateral agreement with five other European partners on the mutual recognition of accreditation of joint programmes (December 2010).

4. Automatic recognition of qualifications

In the period 2005-2006, organisations responsible for recognition of foreign qualifications and the accreditation organisations from the Netherlands and Flanders, Norway, Austria, Poland and Switzerland signed the Joint Declaration concerning the automatic recognition of qualifications. The declaration is based on mutual recognition of accreditation decisions and on the implementation of compatible national qualification frameworks in order to achieve the automatic recognition of qualifications.

5. Pro-actively following up on international developments in quality assurance and higher education

NVAO maintains excellent contacts with the appropriate government officials in the Dutch and Flemish ministries and with the appropriate members of the international network organisations.

Other international activities that the Dutch government assigned to NVAO were the assessment of programmes offered on the former Netherlands Antilles and Aruba. NVAO also participates in international projects in order to follow up international developments in specific fields. In 2010 and 2011 NVAO supervised university colleges and their umbrella organisations in Croatia to build an accreditation system. NVAO will supervise a similar project in Armenia in 2012.

Finally NVAO coordinated the external review of ENQA of the accreditation organisation HSV in Sweden in 2012.

Other additional tasks of NVAO are the assessment of domain specific learning outcomes in Flanders and the monitoring of NLQF, both are described in chapter 6. In attachment 2 the additional tasks of NVAO are described more in detail.

8.5 / Additional tasks

Apart from its primary responsibilities (i.e. (initial) accreditation), NVAO has been charged with several additional tasks over the years. These tasks have to be approved by the Committee of Ministers or the respective departments of Education and should be compatible with NVAO's mission. For these tasks, extra funding is made available. In NVAO's Strategic Policy Statement it is set down that new tasks should have an obvious connection with quality assessment of programmes.

NVAO's most important additional tasks are the assessments of applications for:

- > Associate degree programmes (up till now 300 applications over the past years);
- > Open system (5 applications);
- > Room for Talent (11);
- > Recognition of private higher education institutions (15);
- > Broadened programmes (30);
- > Training Schools (83);
- > Educational Minors (10);
- > Academic Teacher training primary education (6);
- > Management of the official Register of Higher Education of Flanders (*hogeronderwijsregister*);
- > Academisation (140);
- > HB05 (5);
- > Extension of academic master's programmes (29).

Chapter

9

Overview of
actions taken
since the
previous
external
review 2007

9.1 / Follow up of recommendations regarding NVAO

In the assessment report of the external review in 2007 the committee suggested several recommendations regarding the operation of NVAO. In this chapter the follow-up by NVAO on these recommendations will be discussed shortly.

The review committee formulated the following recommendations.

Recommendation on ESG 2.8

NVAO is advised to give more attention to the production of system-wide and comparative analyses – also with regard to the functioning of the accreditation procedures. More attention for these analyses will be beneficial for the 'information function' of accreditation, as expressed by umbrella organizations of institutes and by student organizations.

During the last few years NVAO completed a substantial number of comparative analyses. In several cases the analyses were ordered by the executive board of NVAO. A well-executed analysis can support and validate the decision-making of NVAO in case of single applications, and it provides also a solid basis to start a discussion with a cluster of programmes about quality assurance and quality enhancement. In other recent cases NVAO was asked by (one of) the stakeholders to present a comparative analysis of a specific programme cluster and a discipline or domain. The comparative analyses of the Teacher training (cluster) and the Arts programmes (discipline or domain) are good examples of such requests. In both cases the Dutch Minister issued the request.

A short overview of the main comparative analyses in the last few years includes:

- > Academic programmes Linguistics in NL (2007);
- > Academic programmes Sociology in NL (2007);
- > Professional bachelor programmes Industrial Engineering in NL (2009);
- > Academic programmes Educational Sciences in NL and FL (2009);
- > Professional bachelor programmes Teacher training primary education in NL (2009);
- > Professional bachelor and master programmes Fine & Performing Arts (2010) in NL and
- > Academic research master programmes in NL (2012).

Several comparative analyses are still in progress, for instance the professional bachelor programmes Human Resource Management, Communication and Social Work

in the Netherlands. An international comparative analysis on the quality and level of three professionally oriented programmes in the Netherlands and Flanders together with two foreign countries or regions is planned.

Another kind of comparative analysis concerns the professional master programmes in the Netherlands in 2007. At that time NVAO had assessed these programmes for three years. As professional master programmes are a new type of programme in Dutch higher education since 2004, an evaluation was useful to share first experiences and good practices.

The evaluation of the former system and of the pilots in order to develop the next system are good examples of system-wide analyses of the system.

In attachment 1 the completed comparative and system-wide analyses are described in more detail.

Recommendation on ESG 3.8

To strengthen its accountability procedures regarding the relation with stakeholders and to focus in its internal quality assurance system and to include relevant stakeholders in the general board that are not represented yet.

Since February 2010 a former president of the European Students Organisation is a member of the General Board of the NVAO. A new member of the professional field is present as well. Members of the General Board however do not represent a sector or field, but are nominated purely on individual merits and operate purely in their personal name.

The Advisory Council of NVAO includes students since 2007. Representatives of the student unions ISO and LSVB (in the Netherlands) and VVS (in Flanders) have joined the Advisory Council for some years now.

Recently, in 2011, a resonance group was established to evaluate the introduction and the performance of the new system in the Netherlands. Representatives of institutions, umbrella organisations and students are the main members of this board.

In Flanders a four-party platform has been introduced. Representatives of the Flemish cabinet, the higher education department of the ministry, VLIR and VLHORA (the umbrella organisations of the institutions) and NVAO meet on a regular basis to discuss matters of quality assurance and the preparation of the new accreditation system in Flanders. Representatives of VLHUR, being the new Flemish QAA merger of the former quality departments of VLIR and VLHORA, and VVS are invited when appropriate.

NVAO focused in structuring its Internal Quality Assurance system since the last review in 2007. In chapter 4.8 the main characteristics, strengths and weaknesses of the current operational system are evaluated.

9.2 / Follow up of recommendations regarding the accreditation system

The review committee of 2007 recommended on several issues regarding the higher education system and the accreditation system in the Netherlands and Flanders. As the accreditation system in the Netherlands and Flanders as such is not subject of this review the follow-up on the recommendations are only described here in relation to a first reflection on the new accreditation system (see also chapter 7) and more specifically, in attachment 10.

The Committee recommended further harmonization of regulations and procedures between the two countries with regard to the categories in the table below. As the table makes clear on almost all recommendations progress is being made. The new accreditation system complies with a number of recommendations.

All in all, the conclusion of the self-evaluation of the new system in chapter 7 can be repeated. Over the years, and surely in the new accreditation system, the Netherlands and Flanders have come closer together, if not in system and regulations, then in practice. Even before the new system was introduced, the two countries have learned from each other for the better. The order of testing the macro-efficiency of a new programme before initial accreditation is a good example. The difference that keep existing in the new accreditation system are results of the different degrees of trust and of cultural differences. Such differences provide interesting insights and deserve being investigated in order to learn from each other. The fact that the first round of institutional reviews in Flanders will not have legal consequences and will be evaluated can provide input for improvements to the Dutch system.

Table 8

2007 recommendation	New system NL	New system FL
> Legal protection of titles	Recommendations of minister to be decided Will be checked in external QA	Only with accreditation and strict use of Arts and Sciences only with academic programmes
> Sanctions in the case of a negative accreditation. The Flemish system (of a statutory repair period) should also be implemented in the Dutch system	Recovery period	Recovery period
> Position of macro-efficiency check	Macro-efficiency check for programmes by official institutions	Macro-efficiency check for programmes by official institutions
> Length of accreditation cycles	6 years	8 years followed by 6 years
> Clustered assessments on binational scale	Clustered assessments on national scale	Clustered assessments on national scale
> Time limits & sanctions	Time limits (6 months) with fines unless warning	Flexible time limits (4 months) without fines
> Relationship NVAO-QAAs	NVAO instead of institution orders QAA	NVAO communicates and supports QAA on quality (protocol)
> Future concept of self-accrediting institutions	Institutional audit possible first step	Institutional audit possible first step

Colophon

Self-evaluation report NVAO 2012
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Attachments

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List of Attachments

- 1. Comparative and system-wide analyses**
- 2. Additional tasks of NVAO**
- 3. Workflow scheme Initial Accreditation**
- 4. Organisational chart NVAO**
- 5. Strategic Policy Statement NVAO 2012 – 2016**
- 6. IQA Quality scheme, targets per domain**
- 7. IQA Report of progress per domain**
- 8. IQA Evaluation scheme**
- 9. Key figures higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders**
- 10. Follow-up of the recommendations of the review committee 2007 regarding the accreditation systems in the Netherlands and Flanders**
- 11. Accreditation Frameworks in the Netherlands and Flanders**
- 12. Sources**
- 13. Abbreviations**

Attachment 1 Comparative and system-wide analyses

*Analysis Academic programmes Linguistics (2007)*¹

In 2007 the executive board of NVAO decided to start a pilot regarding the evaluation of the assessment and accreditation of the academic programmes Language Sciences in the Netherlands, in order to contribute to the enhancement objective of the accreditation system. The analysis focuses on strengths and weaknesses that programmes in this cluster have in common and of the approach and execution of the assessment by the panel. The report was discussed in the meeting of the NVAO board in September 2007 and was used internally as a try-out to discuss what NVAO's policy and practice regarding comparative and system-wide analyses should be.

*Analysis Academic programmes Sociology (November 2007)*²

The executive board decided to start another meta-analysis of academic programmes in 2007. The cluster Sociology in the Netherlands was analyzed, first because of the low quantitative study results of the programmes, but also because of a lack of ambition on the side of the institutions. It was felt that this lack of ambition reflected both student and teacher attitudes and was not influencing quality of graduates in a positive way. The report was published in November 2007 and the results were discussed with the deans of the faculties of all involved universities during a meeting in Utrecht on 27 November 2007.

Conference professional master programmes and seminar (2007)

On 21 June 2007 NVAO organised a conference Professional master programmes. At that time NVAO had assessed these programmes for three years. As Professional master programmes are a new type of programme in Dutch higher education since 2004 a evaluation was useful to share first experiences and good practice. During the conference four approved applications by NVAO from different disciplines were presented as examples of good practice, namely examples of programmes from the sectors Health, Arts, Education and Natural Sciences. Furthermore the importance of professional master programmes for Dutch higher education and the professional field was emphasized by the umbrella organisation of the universities of applied sciences [The HBO-raad]. The conference was concluded by a forum discussion between four experts, contributing from different perspectives, and the audience of about 80 people. NVAO presented all presentations and the results of the conference on its website.

*Analysis Professional bachelor programmes Industrial Engineering (2009)*³

In 2009 NVAO started an internal, comparative analysis of the professional programme cluster Industrial Engineering. The main objective was to apply a check regarding the internal consistency in decision making as a large number of programmes were involved. A second objective was to compare the quality of the programmes on some specific aspects as coherence, study results and assessment. The report was discussed in the meeting of the executive board of NVAO on 1 September 2009. The result was not shared with the involved institutions as the objective was mainly NVAO internal oriented to support NVAO's decision making process.

*Analysis Academic programmes Educational Sciences (2009)*⁴

In 2009 NVAO completed the comparison of the academic programmes Educational Sciences in the Netherlands and Flanders. This investigation was initiated, because of the concern about the achieved learning outcomes, the lack of complexity and study load of the curriculum in the programmes Pedagogical Sciences [*Pedagogische Wetenschappen*] in the Netherlands. It turned out that in general the Flemish programmes are more intense than the programmes in the Netherlands. Especially the achieved study load and the achieved learning outcomes are at a higher level. The results of this study were used by NVAO for its internal process to get a better picture of the quality of these programmes in the Netherlands and Flanders.

*Analysis professional bachelor programmes Teacher training (primary education, 2009)*⁵

The programmes Teacher training for primary education have been subject of public debate in the Netherlands in 2009. Social and political concern raised about the expertise of teachers in primary education, especially

¹ [Meta-analyse cluster Taalwetenschappen, September 2007]

² [Meta-analyse cluster Sociologie, November 2007]

³ [Analyse Technische Bedrijfskunde, September 2009]

⁴ [Breedteanalyse Agogische en Pedagogische Wetenschappen Vlaanderen en Pedagogische Wetenschappen en Onderwijskunde Nederland, December 2009]

⁵ Systeembrede analyse hbo-bachelor Opleiding tot leraar basisonderwijs, 14 Oktober 2009

regarding their elementary skills related to calculating and Dutch language. As a result, on request of the Minister, NVAO started a meta-analysis on the Teacher programmes in primary education after completion of the accreditation procedure in these clusters. NVAO presented the results to the Minister, the Parliament and the involved stakeholders in higher education in 2009 and delivered through this report to the public discussion about the quality of these programmes.

Sector-wide analysis "Analysis of Fine & Performing Arts Assessment Reports" (2010)⁶

The request from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) to the Netherlands and Flanders Accreditation Organisation (NVAO) to describe the developments in Fine & Performing Arts programmes (professional bachelor and master) resulted in an extensive and in-depth analysis of 52 assessment reports in the disciplines of Fine Arts, Design, Dance, Theatre and Music.

This sector-wide "Analysis of Fine & Performing Arts Assessment Reports" produced a positive picture of the quality of these arts programmes. This picture reflects the thoroughness of the programmes and is underscored by several strengths including a profession-oriented approach, individual artistic development, technical skills in the field, up-to-date input and a wide range of expertise on the part of the teachers, differentiation in the programmes offered and stringent selection for admission. In addition, several points for attention regarding the theory courses, the research component, the preparation for "entrepreneurship" and the formal and structural involvement of alumni and the professional field, indicate issues that could raise the quality of these arts programmes with additional attention and effort. These matters require a result-oriented approach.

On 16 September 2010 NVAO organised a seminar for representatives of the Arts programmes to share the main facts, findings and conclusions and to stimulate the follow up of the recommendations.

Later on, the report provided a good reference to the committee Dijkgraaf, which formulated a new sector plan for the Arts sector (2011), commissioned by the umbrella organization of the Dutch universities of applied sciences [HBO-Raad].

Review Research Master 2011

In 2010 NVAO started the review project Research Master. The Research Master is a separate category of academic master's programmes focusing on the role of academic researcher. The length of these master's programmes is two years (120 EC). Part of the review is an International Thesis Assessment Study that was completed in Spring 2011 and presented during a NVAO seminar on 24 March 2011. A panel of experts assessed 74 master thesis, 37 of graduates of research master programmes and 37 thesis from graduates of regular master programmes in the same discipline. Within the same discipline all thesis of research master graduates were assessed with a higher note. The assessors were unaware of the origin of the thesis, belonging to research master or the regular group and unaware of the result of the thesis, achieved by the student. In the opinion of the assessment panel the research master theses are in general 'good or excellent' and can meet international top standards.

In the investigation participated the programmes Cognitive and Clinical Neurosciences (Universiteit Maastricht); Economics & Business Administration (Universiteit van Tilburg); Communication Science (Universiteit van Amsterdam) en Media Studies (Universiteit van Amsterdam).

The results were presented during the seminar *Excellent profiling* in The Hague on 24 March 2011 attended by about 125 representatives from higher education institutions. Later a publication was completed (Peaks In Sight).

⁶ [Analyse visitatierapporten Kunstvakopleidingen, mei 2010]. Available in Dutch on the NVAO website

Attachment 2 Additional tasks NVAO

Associate degrees

A substantial additional task of NVAO since 2006 concerns the assessment of Dutch applications for Associate degree (Short cycle) programmes. More than 300 applications of these 'pilot' programmes were assessed by NVAO at the request of the State Secretary of Education in the Netherlands in eight rounds of execution in the period 2006 – 2012. These programmes can be provided by universities of applied sciences or recognised institutions which offer accredited bachelor's programmes in the same field of study. Associate degree programmes are short programmes in the professional bachelor's programme that is usually completed within two years. After completion of these programmes graduates can enter the labour market or continue their studies in the bachelor's programme of the university of applied sciences. It is expected that Associate degree programmes will be definitely legalized in the Dutch act in 2013. The graduates of the running Associate degree pilot programmes receive already the Associate degree, as has been regulated by law, and which situates at level 5 of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

'Open system'

A second extra task in the last years concerned the initial accreditation of programmes within the Dutch experiment 'Open System' [Open Bestel]. These programmes are offered by either a recognised (private) university of applied sciences or a recognised (private) institution for higher education, which under the terms of this experiment can receive public funding. The objective of the pilot is to investigate the (dis)advantages of a level playing field for funded and recognised (private) higher education institutions. The results of the experiment are not available yet.

'Room for Talent'

Another additional task concerns the assessment of the Dutch experiment 'Room for Talent' [Ruim baan voor talent]. Under the terms of this experiment, programmes are allowed to raise tuition fees and enrol students on the basis of selection if programmes offer 'recognised and evident added value'. Another part of this experiment was that it aimed to enhance the development of honours' programmes. To assess 'evident added value' in programmes with selection of students and higher tuition fees and for the assessment of honours' programmes, NVAO developed assessment frameworks and set up an evaluation committee. The evaluation report of the experiment was published in 2007⁷. Partly due to the results of the experiment a new law concerning Room for Talent will come into effect on 8 July 2011. The secretary of state asked NVAO to develop a framework for the assessment of the distinctive feature Small and intensive education. A concept was discussed with stakeholders in August 2011.

Recognition of private higher education institutions

The Dutch State Secretary of Education, Culture and Science stipulated the policy regulation concerning recognition of private higher education institutions and requested NVAO to play a role in the recognition procedure. NVAO is involved in this procedure since 2004 and assessed 15 applications. In September 2010 the procedure was renewed by the ministry. For this purpose, NVAO developed a new protocol⁸, including the criteria that programmes have to meet to be eligible for recognition. Recognition means that in the Netherlands a higher education institution – with the exception of the right to public funding – obtains the same rights as a publicly funded institution. If an institution is neither publicly funded, nor recognised and applies for accreditation of its programmes with NVAO, the institution will have to apply for recognition first.

Protocol broadened programmes

The Dutch minister for Education, Culture and Science determines whether an institution's intention to combine two or more programmes already incorporated in the Central Register for Programmes in Higher Education (CROHO) leads to a broadened new programme. In this case, NVAO carries out a marginal assessment and

⁷ Evaluation report Sminia Committee, [Evaluatie van de Commissie Sminia in het kader van Ruim Baan voor Talent, 25 mei 2007]

⁸ Procedure Initial Accreditation regarding new Legal bodies in higher education [Protocol verzwaaarde toets nieuwe opleiding, augustus 2010]

provides advice to the minister. For this purpose, the 'Protocol Broadened Programmes'⁹ has been developed. Since 2004 NVAO assessed 30 applications for broadening programmes.

Higher Education Register

Another NVAO task concerns the online development and database administration of the Higher Education Register in Flanders (HOR, www.highereducation.be). This website lists all the recognised bachelor and master's programmes in Flanders.

Assessment Teacher Training Schools

The concept 'school based teacher education' has made a rapid progress in the Netherlands. 'Education together' is an important innovation with a complex implementation.

A Teacher Training School ("Opleidingschool") is a partnership between a school for primary, secondary or vocational education and one or more teacher training institutes. In 2009 the Minister of Education asked NVAO to assess the Teacher Training Schools. NVAO accepted this assignment and assessed 83 Teacher Training Schools. For this purpose NVAO developed an evaluation framework and composed an assessment panel that advised NVAO about the achieved learning outcomes of the graduates and about the partnership between the involved schools and the teacher training institutes.

All Teacher Training Schools have been visited by two teams of experts: one team advised the NVAO about the achieved learning outcomes, another team advised the NVAO about the partnership between the Training School and the Teacher programme(s).

Based on the assessment results, NVAO advised the Minister about the quality of the Teacher Training Schools. Three Teacher Training Schools were assessed as excellent, 24 as good, 30 as sufficient and 26 as insufficient. An additional result of the assessment was that success factors for Teacher Training Schools could be indicated, as the importance of real partnership, controlled growth of Teacher Training Schools, personnel policy, internal quality assurance and an inspiring learning environment.

Assessment of Academic Teacher training primary education

Academic Teacher training primary education is a special programme for students, attending an academic bachelor programme educational sciences, with interest in primary education. These students can follow at the same time the professional bachelor programme Teacher training primary education. This dual programme lasts four years (240 EC) and was introduced by the minister to enlarge the number of teachers in primary education and to increase the quality of graduates Teacher primary education. NVAO was asked by the minister to advise him on the quality of these dual programmes. In the years 2010 and 2011 NVAO assessed six programmes.

Assessment of Educational Minors

Educational minors offer the opportunity to students of academic, discipline oriented bachelor programmes to obtain for a teaching qualification. In 2009 the Minister asked NVAO to advise regarding the quality of plans for Educational minors. NVAO developed criteria and a limited framework and advised on 10 applications.

Research in February 2011 showed that the running Educational minors do meet the expectations of the graduates and the schools, where they start to work.

Applications Extension of academic master's programmes

Academic master programmes in the Netherland last mostly one of two years (60 or 120 ECTS). Programmes of 60 ECTS can apply for extension to 120 ECTS, when they are of the opinion that the intended learning outcomes cannot be achieved by a curriculum of 60 ECTS. It is up to an expert panel and NVAO to formulate an advice and to the minister to decide. Up to now NVAO assessed 29 applications of this kind.

Academisation

In Flanders the former programmes of second cycle from the university colleges have to be transformed to academic bachelor's and master's programmes. These programmes are to develop to full academic programmes, but are professionally oriented as well. This reform has been running step by step since 2004. Special attention is spent to the development of academic research skills of students. In 2013 all involved programmes should meet the same requirements as the academic programmes of universities. NVAO incorporated the transition in the Accreditation framework and developed a manual Academisation and a manual Academisation Arts programmes.

⁹ [Protocol ter uitvoering van de artikelen 7.1 en 7.2 van de Beleidsregel doelmatigheid hoger onderwijs 2009 (Stcrt 2009, 115), inhoudende de uitgangspunten van de NVAO met betrekking tot de samenvoeging (verbreding) van opleidingen, de zogenoemde planningsneutrale conversie]

In 2010 and 2011 NVAO decided on applications of 12 institutions for the accreditation of 140 academic bachelor's and master's programmes in several disciplines, in which it was assessed to what extent the Academisation process has been implemented and whether it can be assumed that the process will be finished in the academic year 2012-2013. For each cluster of study programmes NVAO has been making an internal comparative analyses of the scores, textual appreciations and recommendations by the review panels in order to decide consistently on the possible conclusions (positive, negative, additional information, hearing or additional assessment). NVAO will decide on another substantial number of applications regarding academisation in 2012.

HBO5

Flanders will introduce a new level of (Short cycle) education on level 5 of the Flemish Qualification framework: HBO5. It is a professional oriented programme, which does not offer a bachelor's or master's degree, but a graduate diploma.

To support the implementation of HBO5 programmes in Flanders NVAO developed a framework and organized a pilot to generate and disseminate learning experiences. Five institutions participated and their experiences were presented during a seminar¹⁰ in December 2010. The results of the pilots are described in a publication¹¹, which was handed to the Flemish Minister of Education, Youth, Equal chances and Brussels as well as to an audience of 270 people.

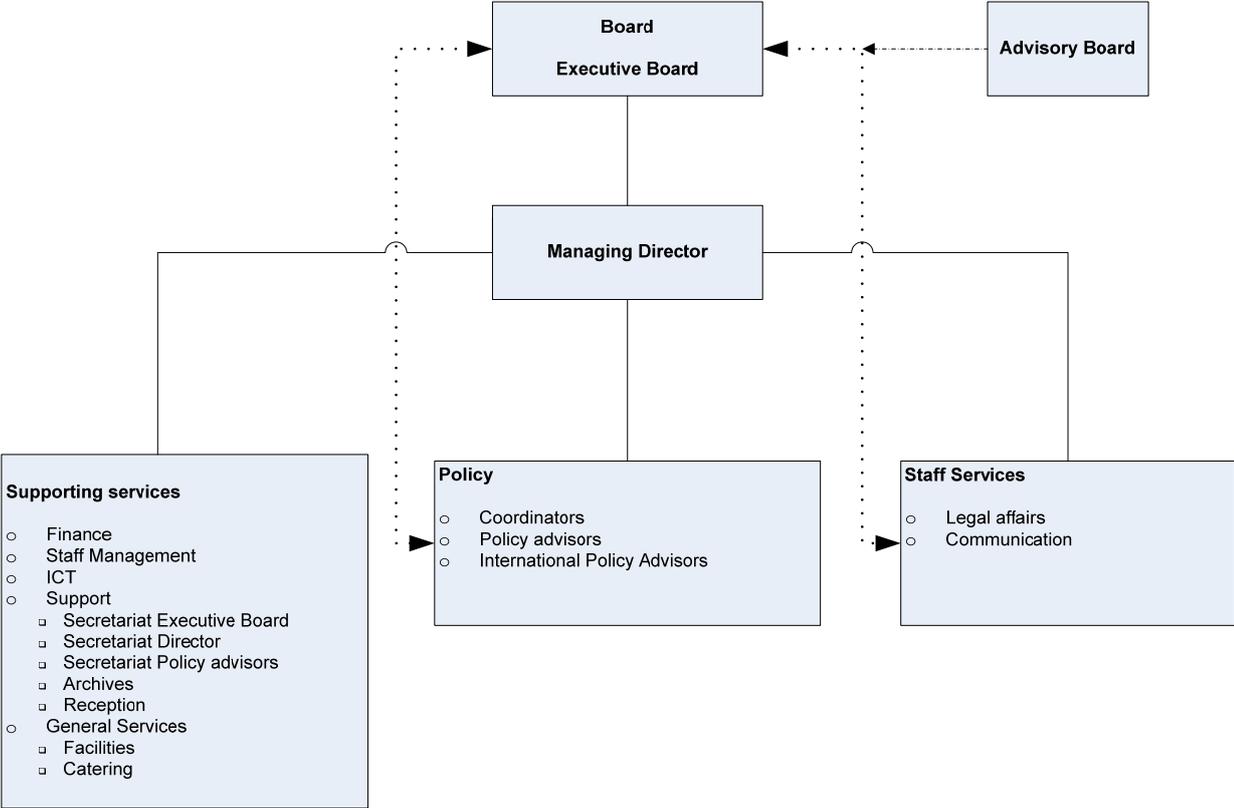
¹⁰ Seminar HBO5, Learning from pilots, 17 december 2010, [*Studedag HBO5 startklaar – Leren uit proefprojecten*]

¹¹ Pilot report Learning effects, December 2010, [*Leereffectenrapport – proefprojecten HBO5*]

Attachment 3 Workflow scheme - an example: Initial Accreditation NVAO

1	Registration of a new postal item (Archive)
2	Preparation of a new application file (Archive)
3	Application to be completed (adding information of the programme) (Archive)
4	To allocate the application in the organisation (Managing director)
5	Adding templates to application en sending confirmation of receipt and invoice (Secretariat policy advisors)
6	Checking the application for completeness (First responsible policy advisor)
7	Proposal panel composition (First responsible policy advisor)
8	Approval panel composition (First responsible Execute board member)
9	Adding panel composition to agenda meeting of the Executive board (Secretary meeting Executive board)
10	Report meeting Executive board (Secretary meeting Executive board)
11A	Informing institution about the panel composition, informing panel, including the supply of the application file, planning site visit (Secretariat policy advisors)
11B	Analysing information file, organisation of the preparatory meeting panel and site visit (First responsible policy advisor)
12	Preparation of the intended decision and belonging documents for the meeting of the Executive board (First responsible policy advisor)
13	Approval intended decision (First responsible board member and lawyer)
14	Adding the intended decision to agenda of the meeting of the Executive board (Secretary of the meeting of the Executive board)
15	Report meeting of the Executive board (Secretary of the meeting of the Executive board)
16	Sending intened decision to the higher education institution (Secretariat policy advisors)
17A	Adding the application to the agenda of the General board (Secretary of the meeting of the General board)
18A	Report meeting of the General board (Secretary of the meeting of the General board)
17B	Preparation definite decision (Secretariat policy advisors)
18B	Control of all documents (First responsible policy advisor)
19	Sending definite decision (Secretariat policy advisors)
20	Publication definite decision and assessment report on NVAO website (department Communication)
21	Completion of the application file and all documents (First responsible policy advisor)
22	Control file by archive en provisional closure (Archive)
23	Definite closure or appeal (Archive)

Attachment 4 Organisational chart NVAO



Legenda:

————— Formal-hierarchical line —————

- - - - - Advice line - - - - -

◀ Internal Consultation line ▶

Attachment 5 Strategic Policy Statement NVAO 2012 - 2016

STRATEGY NVAO 2012 – 2016

1. INTRODUCTION

Now that NVAO has celebrated its first lustrum, the Committee of Ministers has evaluated and extended the NVAO treaty, and Flanders and the Netherlands are entering or have already entered the second phase of the accreditation system, NVAO wants to reassess its strategic goals for the next five years. This is not without reason: the social contexts for higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders have changed considerably the last few years and European developments are also moving forward. Higher education institutions have to adapt to these changing contexts, with students increasingly demanding higher standards and society critically appraising the achievements of institutions and students. This requires an active approach and responsive attitude of NVAO so that it can contribute to achieving optimal quality for higher education in Flanders and the Netherlands. For good education is the most important 'raw material' for both regions and NVAO may be expected to make a significant contribution to good education through its activities. The point of departure for this is that the responsibility for the quality of education lies first and foremost with the institutions. There can be no other way in a mature system of higher education. However, primary responsibility is not a carte blanche: education is too important and too expensive to be not monitored continuously. External quality control assures that the responsibility of the institutions is filled in appropriately.

This Strategy Memorandum first continues with an overview of the most important external developments in higher education in the Netherlands, Flanders and Europe. Next, NVAO will present its mission, values and positioning. These will be translated into a number of strategic goals, after which the relationship with stakeholders, the internal organisation and the working methods of NVAO will be discussed. All this will result in the NVAO's 'strategic agenda' for 2012 - 2016.

2. CONTEXTS

2.1 Society

Due to the importance of higher education for Flanders and the Netherlands, society wants to and should be able to trust the continuing good quality of higher education. Public interest in the achievements of higher education institutions has undeniably increased. Abuses in a small number of institutions, failing administrative procedures and complaints from students and lecturers have led to consternation and general indignation. As a consequence, doubts have arisen about the institutions' educational achievements and there is a call for more stringent supervision to make sure that each diploma has been obtained legitimately and that its holder has the expertise, skills and attitude expected of a recent graduate. Although this concern is understandable and these incidents indeed call for specific measures, the increased media attention for higher education appears to turn each incident into a structural shortcoming, as a result of which the institutions and their supervisors are subjected to an ever-increasing pressure.

In Flanders, the public debate is dominated by recent developments, such as flexibilisation in higher education, academisation of colleges of higher education and their integration in universities as well as the consequences for the organisation and the quality of higher education as a whole. The institutions' difficult financial positions play a large part in this debate.

2.2 Students

By far the majority of students realise it is a privilege to take a degree programme at a university or college of higher education. This position comes with rights and obligations. In return for a substantial study commitment, students may expect to be offered high-quality education that is well organised. This is all the more cogent as the governments increasingly place the responsibility for and the costs of longer study duration and second-degree programmes with the students. For this requires the institutions to take even greater care of the content and process side of education. Moreover, institutions are expected to help students make appropriate study choices by providing good information and showing them at the earliest possible stage if they are suited for a certain study. This involves intake interviews, orientation tests, a (binding) study advice and at least good student career counselling.

2.3 Ambitions

Flanders and the Netherlands both realise that their economic growth and social-cultural power are very much driven by knowledge. The term 'knowledge economy' appears in every policy memorandum and strategy view. Moreover, both regions lack modesty - and quite rightly so - and show considerable ambition. The Netherlands has even expressed the ambition to rank with the top five knowledge-based economies in the world. Flanders, too, pursues an ambitious agenda in VIA. These aspirations require a large effort of the institutions, which are expected to compete with leading institutions in the United States, Great Britain and other western and emerging economies. For this reason, the institutions' achievements in education and research are closely followed.

2.4 Diversity

The belief that students cannot be regarded as one uniform and homogeneous group is taking firmer root all the time. The attention for differences in ability, social backgrounds and learning styles has increased strongly and leads to the conclusion that also in education more diversity is wanted and needed. The last few years the institutions have positioned themselves accordingly: this shows for instance in the creation - and flourishing - of the (liberal arts) colleges, the excellent master's track and honours programmes, preparatory programmes, track and study counselling, new broad programmes, but also associate degree and HBO5 programmes, and a variety of deficiency courses. All this has led to a dramatic rise in the diversity of programmes offered.

Moreover, this diversity is reinforced by the governments that also want the institutions to try and have different profiles from each other. Especially the Dutch government has turned this into an important issue acting on the so-called Veerman report.

2.5 Rankings

In the global 'market' for higher education and in the battle to attract top talent, the prestige of the institutions plays an ever-growing role. This prestige is largely determined by rankings. No matter how strongly one may object methodologically and sometimes also morally to these rankings that are solely based on research results, they do indeed play an important role and the institutions - and also the governments to a certain extent - have no choice but to take them into account. Universities, therefore, will have to carefully balance their attention between research and education, between investments in research and education. In doing so, it is not improbable that research will prevail. The colleges of higher education have managed to escape these rankings so far, but the first signs of wanting to make profiles and differences in quality transparent are already visible.

2.6 Implementation of Bologna

The policy implementations of the Bologna Declaration in 1999 have been formally completed in many European countries. An extraordinary amount of work has been done, but it is clear that formal completion does not equal material implementation in all cases. This is compounded by the fact that implementation did not everywhere take place simultaneously. Great national differences remain within the European Higher Education Area. The Bologna Process is continuing, however, working towards its final goal of realising one European area for higher education and research. After the introduction of the Bachelor Master structure, the implementation of the ECTS system and the Diploma Supplement as well as an independent external assessment system for the quality of education, attention has now shifted to bringing about national qualifications frameworks within a European context and the application of learning outcomes systems. In Europe, Flanders and the Netherlands lead the way in both areas. The last few years, there have been discussions about the most desirable system for external quality assessment in a considerable number of European countries. Although the direction of change is not unequivocal, a noticeable trend seems to emerge towards combinations of institution and programme assessments. The Netherlands and Flanders fit seamlessly into this trend and in a number of areas they have even set the trend for developments in other European countries.

Special attention is needed for the evolutions of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) and the European Quality Agency Register (EQAR), two important outcomes of the Bologna Process. The ESGs put initial responsibility for standards on the institutions and they will be updated in the coming years. The other evolution is the careful expansion of the work area of EQAR registered agencies through national legislation.

2.7 The EU

In addition to 'Bologna', which is a non-legally binding agreement, the EU is increasingly taking initiatives in the area of higher education. In doing so, one cannot escape the impression that the EU wishes to take over the Bologna Process and is taking steps that will impact the national control of higher education. This applies in particular to the manner in which the EU promotes quality labels, aimed at the exercise of professions. This also applies to the increased attention and promotion of directives that set conditions for exercising regulated professions and have an effect on the content of education. And it also applies, possibly and to a lesser extent, to

heavily sponsored EU initiatives to come to its own European classification (U-map) and ranking system (U-Multirank). This European ranking system continues to struggle with the difficulty of formulating sound indicators to measure the quality of education.

Of course, the European activities are stimulated by the increased competition between the two large power blocks. A small number of Anglo-Saxon institutions of higher education still dominate the world's top research universities while Asian knowledge institutions are strongly on the rise. In relative terms, Europe has a much higher number of educational institutions of more than considerable quality, but it obviously feels challenged to take part in this competition and to take initiatives to also create more top institutions, within or across national borders.

3. MISSION, VALUES AND POSITIONING

Based on the Accreditation Treaty, the tasks and powers as laid down in laws, structural decrees and other general regulations as well as the contexts outlined in section 2, NVAO's mission is as follows:

"NVAO is an independent and authoritative binational accreditation organisation set up by the Flemish and Dutch governments, whose primary goal it is to provide an expert and objective judgement of the quality of higher education in Flanders and the Netherlands. NVAO does this with a constructive, critical attitude, respecting the autonomy of institutions and their primary responsibility for the quality of their education, and with an open eye for the growing international context. NVAO is open, clear and transparent towards society and all concerned, especially the institutions of higher education and the students."

This mission translates into three main NVAO tasks:

1. assessing and assuring the quality of Dutch and Flemish higher education;
2. promoting the quality of higher education by promoting a culture of quality, aimed at regular assessment and continuous quality increase;
3. putting Dutch and Flemish sectors of higher education (institutions, programmes) on the map and strengthening their position by means of international cooperation.

NVAO carries out these tasks based on the following composition of values:

- independence
- clarity
- respect for (the autonomy of the institutions and their primary responsibility for the quality of their education).

Mission, tasks and values form the basis for the way in which NVAO will organise its activities in the coming years. In doing so, NVAO also chooses a clear positioning with regard to and for its stakeholders. First and foremost, this positioning will be marked by the necessary independence. For NVAO is neither the 'extended arm of the government' nor is it part of the sector of higher education.

Its judgements have to be respected and trusted, which means that institutions have to feel treated fairly, that the government has to be able to trust the outcomes of accreditation surveys, that students and society have to be able to trust the value of the accreditation judgements and that other parties (for instance foreign institutions and students) know that accredited programmes deliver what they promise. The necessary trust in the quality of the accreditation process and its outcomes have to lead to authority: authority for NVAO, authority for the assessment panels and organisations, but also authority for the institutions and programmes that have been assessed and accredited.

The positioning chosen by NVAO requires an active approach. Active when supplying information, active when pointing out shortcomings and areas for improvement, active also when taking position on issues regarding the quality of higher education. This active approach applies to both the national and international arenas. For NVAO explicitly chooses to put the position of Dutch and Flemish higher education on the international map. With this also comes the obligation for NVAO itself to constantly look for the best possible ways to fulfil its tasks. In the same way education is and should be constantly evolving, the accreditation system has to be adapted regularly to the requirements of the time, to circumstances and to good developments elsewhere. This requires permanent reflection on one's own functioning and the functioning of the system.

4. STRATEGIC IMPLEMENTATIONS

4.1 Assessment and assurance

Clear and independent assessment

It is essential and also an absolute minimum that the quality of education provided by the institutions and programmes is able to meet the (internationally accepted) standards of generic quality. By now institutions and programmes have had the opportunity to gain ample experience with the accreditation system. Their own professionalism and responsibility ought to tell them where to place the pass mark that constitutes a 'pass' or a 'fail' and it is up to them to deliver good results. The most important evidence for this can be found in the achieved learning outcomes in final reports, portfolios and exams. By performing regular benchmarking through self evaluations and by calling in (inter)national experts during assessment procedures, it has to become clear that the achieved learning outcomes compare well internationally. It is with full conviction that NVAO chooses an assessment system that is supported by peers. In the new accreditation system even more demands are made on their qualities and they are either appointed (the Netherlands) or their appointment is recommended (Flanders) by NVAO. The quality of the peers and therefore the panels is decisive for the functioning of an assessment and accreditation system. The term 'peers' does not only refer to subject and disciplinary expertises, but also to expertises in the professional field, education and auditing as well as to international and student-related ones. Due to (the introduction of) a recovery period in the Dutch and Flemish systems, panels are now able to award a fail to standards when required with greater conviction: for in many cases programmes can be given more time to make the necessary improvements and thus raise their quality levels. This requires a completely independent approach of panel members, because the trust placed in the accreditation system stands or falls with the independence and clarity of the panel's judgements.

The independence and clarity with which NVAO and the panels deliver their judgements are in principle based on trust. Trust in lecturers, students, board and management. For the point of departure can be no other than that each person concerned, in whatever role, makes the effort to deliver the best possible education. But even with respect and trust, the panel may come to a negative judgement. The motivation for this judgement - positive or negative - and the manner in which the recommendations for improvement are formulated, are crucial for an improvement incentive to the programmes.

Explicit attention for purpose of quality improvement in reports

An independent assessment by authoritative peers does not only guarantee a good judgement, but it also provides opportunities to formulate recommendations and advice. Judging and advising are two different activities from essentially different perspectives and they ought to be separated carefully in the decision process and in reports. One of the lessons learned from the first phase of the accreditation system is that this distinction was not sufficiently made and was not deemed sufficiently important. As a result, the NVAO's panel judgements were sometimes regarded as less solid and recommendations were considered points of criticism. In the new systems in Flanders and the Netherlands and in the way panels and NVAO operate, the true distinction between judging and recommending has to be made apparent, thus strengthening the purpose of quality improvement of the system.

Increasing the accessibility and information content of decisions and reports

NVAO is aware of the fact that the sheer volume of the accreditation decisions and the assessment reports from the first phase of the system have rendered them insufficiently accessible to serve as a source of information for a wider public. This is regrettable, for the reports contain a wealth of information. In the new system, guidelines have been added concerning the public character of the reports (a summary of the judgement that is easily accessible), the obligatory enclosures with factual information (such as contact hours, staff-student ratio, returns) and a differentiated judgement on the level of standards and the total. This range of informative improvements should lead to more information for those concerned (in the first place the students) and those interested in higher education. This does require a meaningful and unequivocal defining of data, such as, for instance, success rates. NVAO will take initiatives to this end.

Making differences in quality and profiling transparent

When increasing the informative value of judgements, decisions and reports, it is also fitting to make differences in quality and profiling between institutions and programmes transparent. This has the strong backing of in particular the Dutch government, arising mostly from the need to make clear to students and the labour market what (institutions and) programmes stand for. A great help in all this is cluster assessment, which already exists in Flanders and is obligatory in the Netherlands as of 2012. Assessing on a four-point scale makes it possible to

map out the differences in quality even more clearly. Not only a differentiated judgement but profile features, too, can help to have students make appropriate choices and to have employers choose from the correct pool of graduates. The profiles of the programmes can be expressed in the content objectives and the education process, and can be supported further by applying for distinctive (quality) features. Although programmes have not been very keen to do this so far, NVAO initiatives to arrive at a distinction between the areas of 'internationalisation' and 'entrepreneurship' have been greeted with enthusiasm by Dutch higher education at least. Besides, making the differences in profiling and quality transparent may encourage institutions and programmes to position themselves clearly. This, too, can contribute to the content development of and differentiation between fields of study.

4.2 Promoting a culture of quality

Making good use of institutional audits

Important for the continuous improvement of quality is the attention for the creation of a culture of quality in educational institutions. For accreditation provides a random picture and it is not good if the attention of the programmes is only aimed at achieving the threshold for accreditation every number of years. A culture of quality, by contrast, is an organisational culture that is aimed at quality and its continuous improvement. For this reason, in the new accreditation system much attention is given to assessing the quality assurance system at institutional level. The question then is whether an institution is in control of the quality of its education, in the sense that the board of an institution has a clear picture of its education results, receives signals of inadequate functioning, is able and willing to take measures and pays attention to improvements.

Vital for the creation and existence of a culture of quality is having an attitude that is critical and development driven with regard to one's own achievements: this goes for lecturers among themselves, this goes for students, management, the professional field and alumni. Collectively they all ought to guarantee the existence and improvement of the quality of a programme. Stimulating this critically constructive attitude is a prerequisite for the creation of a culture of quality. In this area, too, NVAO will act encouragingly, especially by spreading good practices.

An active approach in promoting the quality of education

NVAO wants to contribute to intensifying discussions about the quality of education. There are various tools for this. Dutch and Flemish legislators agree that NVAO should devote more time and attention to making analyses that cross programme boundaries. These can be analyses of clusters of programmes in a particular domain, but also thematic reports dealing with issues that politics and society find relevant. Of course, the aim of these analyses is to come to conclusions and to subsequently base recommendations for improvement on these. Moreover, NVAO will gain an insight into good practice, when the judgement of 'excellent' is awarded, for example, to standards and programmes. The same goes for distinctive (quality) features. NVAO will focus on these through conferences, debates, seminars and publications. Its role here is to facilitate and inspire the sector of higher education, offering institutions and programmes the opportunity to assume responsibility to come to quality improvement.

4.3 International perspective

As a bi-national organisation, NVAO has paid much attention to its international position from when it was founded. Both governments have encouraged this international profiling and it is also in keeping with NVAO's bi-national character. ECA, the European Consortium for Accreditation, was founded as early as 2003; NVAO is in charge of the secretariat of INQAAHE; through its board members, NVAO has a presence in the boards of ENQA and EQAR; collaboration agreements have been signed and projects have been carried out with numerous other countries.

Obviously, NVAO is not internationally active for its own sake. Of course, its international activities have to serve goals that will be of use to Flemish and Dutch institutions of higher education. However, it is not always easy to make that direct use immediately obvious. But in the same way the Netherlands and Flanders wish to profile themselves as prominent knowledge economies, Flemish and Dutch institutions of higher education choose to have prominent international profiles, NVAO, too, will have to profile itself internationally, in the vanguard of quality assurance organisations.

Good positioning of Flemish and Dutch higher education abroad

On balance, Flemish and Dutch higher education is of good quality. This is also recognised abroad. That quality has to be underlined by the quality of the assessment systems used. This makes it necessary for NVAO to expound the quality of the accreditation system, especially by drawing attention to the unambiguous manner in

which it judges the level aspired to by the institutions and that achieved by their students. The Netherlands and Flanders are ahead when it comes to assessing achieved learning outcomes. This practice is a prerequisite for thorough international comparisons, but it will be a long time yet before other countries and quality assurance organisations will follow their lead. The binary character of Dutch and Flemish higher education fairly often requires an explanation in countries with a unitary system. Especially the Dutch 'professional master' is not known as a separate degree in many countries. Therefore, NVAO will take initiatives to underpin and promote international acceptance of this degree.

Intensifying cooperation with reliable partners

It is beyond doubt that institutions benefit from a system of accreditation that is considered solid and reliable by foreign institutions and quality assurance organisations. It increases trust in its quality. However, the broadness and strictness of the Flemish and Dutch system of accreditation, which is remarkable in an international perspective, occasionally lead to self-critical comments about our higher education, while foreign programmes and systems are a lot less critical with regard to certain aspects, such as for instance 'achieved level', which they may not even assess! So now and then it appears that a difference is arising between domestic criticism and foreign appreciation. This does not mean to say that the standard of quality should be lowered, but it does mean that NVAO and the institutions have to communicate well and choose their partnerships carefully.

Developing a set of instruments for promoting internationalisation

Choosing carefully plays an important role, for instance, when it comes to the applaudable foreign mobility of students. Whereas during the first years of mobility promotion, academic tourism was by no means accidental when choosing foreign destinations, now quality requirements are set by institutions, programmes and students. This is why NVAO chooses to work with preferred partners (especially in Central and North-West Europe), but also looks for strong partners elsewhere in Europe by means of distinctive features, in particular in the field of internationalisation. In this way, NVAO also hopes to make an indirect contribution to one of the objectives on the Leuven agenda, namely promoting student and teacher mobility.

Active contribution to comparability between programmes

Student mobility can also be promoted as more and better data are known about the content of the programmes that are offered in the thousands of European institutions of higher education. Crossroads continues to be an excellent instrument for this. But the possibilities to compare between programmes require more effort, which is why active involvement in determining and interpreting national qualifications frameworks is of great importance. In this area, too, the Netherlands and Flanders are leading the way in Europe. The same goes for the use of learning outcomes, for which Flanders has developed detailed procedures, which have been tested in pilots the last few years. In the Netherlands, too, learning outcomes will be translated into more specifically domain related ones. It may be a consideration to give learning outcomes a more prominent place in assessment and accreditation reports.

Increasing activities outside Europe

Of course, international cooperation cannot be limited to Europe. More and more institutions and programmes are active in Asia and the US, and this also requires intercontinental relations and agreements from NVAO. For the Netherlands and Flanders have major ambitions in higher education. External quality control ought to be in line with these ambitions and to promote and assure them. The NVAO's international activities and collaborations need to also serve this purpose.

Relations have been established and sometimes formalised with organisations in Japan and China, while cooperation with American accreditation organisations takes place on an ad-hoc basis. Especially the elimination of degree mills requires close cooperation and a pattern of close relations.

Enhancing the added value of Flemish-Dutch cooperation

NVAO wishes to clearly emphasise and enhance the added value of the Flemish-Dutch cooperation. This added value is primarily evident in the detached manner with which NVAO can make its judgements due to its bi-national nature. This manifests itself in the way NVAO operates, with both Flemish and Dutch eyes looking at how programmes are judged. The same bi-nationality is reflected in the composition of the panels, the more so as soon as the Netherlands, too, will have introduced cluster assessments. But more is possible, not only in the cooperation across boundaries between institutions and programmes, tuning of domain-related learning outcomes, analysing education results in domains and disciplines, but also by simply exchanging information and good practices. In all these areas NVAO wants to organise more activities and thus strengthen Flemish-Dutch cooperation. However, it is with great disappointment that NVAO concludes that the existence of close Flemish

and Dutch cooperation in the accreditation system has not yet led to unequivocal steps towards mutual Dutch-Flemish recognition of diplomas. With the accreditation system in mind this is hard to understand and not easy to explain either. For in both regions assessment of the bachelor's and master's levels takes place based on the Dublin descriptors and the generic and domain-specific learning outcomes that are based on these. The NVAO pronouncements ensure that bachelor's and master's levels are achieved. This should be the basis of mutual recognition rather than comparing the content and/or length of programmes. In the light of the intended creation of a European Higher Education Area, the Netherlands and Flanders should at least see to it that this issue is sorted binationally.

5. RELATIONS WITH STAKEHOLDERS

NVAO works in a comprehensive field. Not only is it confronted with two systems of higher education, but also with different political cultures and structures that give rise to different courses of action and positions. This means that the stakeholders in both systems have to be dealt with in a careful but sometimes different manner. Good communication is essential for this.

5.1 Institutions

Of course, the institutions of higher education are very important stakeholders. In its approach of the institutions, NVAO chooses for critical fairness: a critical, objective and respectful approach. This attitude is a result of the way NVAO sees its role, which has as its first main task the assessment and assurance of the level of Dutch and Flemish education. The institutions need to be well aware of this role: NVAO is neither there to 'settle scores' nor to cover up, but to assess if at least a generic level of quality is provided - and preferably more than that. The recommendations of the panels and the broader, more reflexive analyses by NVAO offer good directions to come to quality improvement at the level of an individual programme, institution, domain or theme.

5.2 Politics

The position of politics, as a derivative of society, as a stakeholder has changed considerably the last few years. On the one hand, this has to do with the aspirations of the governments to strengthen their knowledge economies, in which higher education plays a crucial role. On the other hand, politics has also become the self-appointed spokesperson of generally felt concern about noted shortcomings in quality. This leads to calls for clear pronouncements on quality, for identifying problems and closing leaks in supervision. Therefore it is necessary that NVAO, and consequently also the institutions, provide unequivocal information about those critical success factors that are considered decisive for the current quality and for the improvement capacity of institutions and programmes. The situation in the Netherlands, for that matter, is complex because both NVAO and the Inspectorate of Education have a role in the assessment and supervision of the quality of education. Although NVAO in principle is only concerned with assessing the content and results of education, and the Inspectorate's tasks have the application of rules and legislation as their departure point, an overlap between the activities of both organisations is almost inevitable. For this reason, the Inspectorate and NVAO have signed a covenant in which agreements have been made about the way in which the two organisations cooperate in order to come to an assessment system that functions to the best of its ability and also keeps the costs down for the institutions.

5.3 Society

The last few years NVAO has been relatively reticent in contributing facts or opinions to social debates. By consciously choosing to call itself an 'authoritative' organisation in its mission and by putting more emphasis on promoting quality improvement, NVAO will also adopt a more public stance. This political stance is especially aimed at quality improvement in higher education and strengthening a culture of quality. This comes with one caveat: more supervision and more rules do not automatically lead to better quality. NVAO also considers it its duty to point to the consequences of changes to the system and a new, greater need for information. The issue of 'reducing the burden of accreditation' is firmly on the agenda and the issue of a possible reduction in bureaucracy remains topical under all circumstances.

5.4 Students

Much of the NVAO's activities has to benefit students. It would be good if, before starting their studies, more students would act like well-informed consumers, making rational considerations regarding the future institution and programme of their choice. NVAO is going to actively contribute to this, not only by actively engaging students in all types of assessment panels, but also by taking care of good accessibility of information on the quality of the programmes. The latter increasingly plays a role in view of the growing call for realising a distinction

between institutions and programmes. By also involving the institutions' students as well as possible in assessing the quality of education, they will evolve from education consumers into education participants.

5.5 Evaluation organisations

NVAO duly takes into account the functioning and quality of evaluation organisations. In Flanders the position of these organisations is defined by law, in the Netherlands they will have to qualify to fulfil an active role in the assessment and accreditation system. The quality of the system is strongly dependent on the work of the panels and evaluation organisations. Open communication, good feedback and high-quality participation from all those concerned will therefore have to give the system a solid foundation.

5.6 Professional field and labour market

The labour market, too, is increasingly interested in data on quality and profiling. This interest can be seen at the 'back' of the system, from graduates, but certainly also at the 'front' when setting the intended learning outcomes or qualifications that students have to meet. By publishing clear reports and organising thematic meetings, NVAO can contribute to complying with requests for data on quality and profiling.

5.7 International colleague organisations

NVAO also considers its foreign colleague organisations as stakeholders. They should not only understand how the Flemish-Dutch accreditation system functions, but they should also be able to judge if the outcomes of the assessments are sufficiently reliable. Moreover, NVAO has to communicate and explain changes and developments in the Dutch-Flemish system. In international trust, two 'external judgements' play an important role: the ENQA assessment in 2012 to determine if NVAO meets the European Standards and Guidelines resulting in full membership of ENQA, and the subsequent assessment to determine if NVAO continues to be registered with EQAR.

At the moment there are various forms of structural meetings with stakeholders:

- the binational advisory council: with representatives from institutions, students and the professional field;
- meetings with the Committee of Ministers, which take place twice a year;
- the Flemish sounding board meeting with umbrella organisations, evaluation organisations and the government;
- bilateral contacts with (umbrella) organisations, ministries, student organisations, employer organisations.

In order to inform its stakeholders and other interested parties, NVAO yearly publishes an annual report as well as an account of income and expenditure, complete with a positive auditor's report. There are also other publications, a Newsletter, and NVAO has an up-to-date website with a search engine for finding topical information on programmes and institutions.

6. INTERNAL ORGANISATION

It is with a certain satisfaction that NVAO looks back on its achievements of the past 6 to 8 years: as agreed all programmes have now been assessed once (with the exception of a number of Flemish clusters that are still to be accredited in 2012). This means that some 4,000 existing programmes and over 500 applications for new programmes have been assessed.

These activities have been complemented with all kinds of extra tasks, such as assessing Associate Degree programmes in the Netherlands and a HBO5 pilot in Flanders, from programmes like 'training in the school' and educational minors in the Netherlands to domain specific learning results in Flanders, as well as executing all kinds of international projects. This has put considerable pressure on the organisation, both on its staff and finance. Yet the NVAO's regular budget has hardly risen the last few years, which is thanks to the great efficiency and effectiveness of and within the organisation. With the second phase of the accreditation system, the organisation is entering a new phase, but the internal professionalisation and the organisation of its business processes seem to be well prepared for this.

It is becoming clear though that there will be a greater need for the analytical and reflexive abilities of the NVAO as well as its internal quality assurance system. The former is necessary to come to good analyses and recommendations that rise above programme level, the latter especially to implement the desire for differentiation as expressed in judgements in a well-motivated and consistent manner: after all, the institutions and programmes stand to benefit greatly from this.

This means that also within NVAO much attention needs to be paid to the continuous development of its own culture of quality, with as its most important elements:

- permanent sharpness and a critical attitude
- collegial intervision and procedural purity
- consistency in judgements
- an active and reflexive attitude
- quick and institution-oriented processing of applications
- continuous professionalisation of people and work methods
- clear and reliable internal and external communication
- stimulating and directional management
- a slim, but efficient, internal quality assurance on all processes

In this, the NVAO's General Board will act using its common sense and helicopter view as non-executive fellow director, sounding board and facilitator of general procedures. In order to support the introduction of the new system, NVAO has set up a sounding board group for the Netherlands, which will become operational as soon as the first reports on the institutional audits and the new programme assessments have been completed.

In addition, NVAO is considering the creation of an international advisory council, which can apply its foreign expertise especially to detect possible problematic issues in the new systems in Flanders and the Netherlands and also to establish a link with developments abroad. This could be seen as an extra legitimisation as well as the start of thinking about the third phase of the system.

For NVAO it has become clear these past few months that the enthusiasm with which new tasks and possibilities have been received, cannot be allowed to continue without restraint. Increasingly the question will be asked how new demands and developments will be able to contribute to the quality increase and transparency of the Dutch and Flemish higher education as well as our own operations, both internally and externally. This requires more focused choices, which will have to be in line with the strategic course as described in this memorandum.

STRATEGIC AGENDA 2012 – 2016

From the above mission, positioning and strategic elaborations, NVAO derives the following goals it wants to (continue to) realise in the coming years.

Assessment and assurance

- clear and independent assessment of programme quality and of quality assurance at institutional level
- explicit attention for purpose of quality improvement of assessments reports
- increasing information accessibility of decisions and reports, including meaningful and unequivocal defining of core data
- making transparent differences in quality and profiling between programmes and institutions
- implementation and further development of new accreditation systems in the Netherlands and Flanders

Promoting culture of quality

- good use of institutional audits
- active approach in promoting quality of education by means of:
 - encouraging institutions and programmes to act on recommendations in assessment reports
 - broader analyses of and reflections on system and domain level and theme analyses
 - meetings and seminars, aimed at opportunities for quality improvement in higher education and possibilities to realise these

International perspective

- good positioning of the quality of Flemish and Dutch higher education abroad
- intensive cooperation with reliable and internationally leading partners
- development of instruments for international cooperation of institutions and programmes
- active contribution to increase comparability of programmes
- increase activities outside Europe
- (continue) to look for the best possible forms of external quality assessment
- increasing and clarifying the added value of Flemish-Dutch cooperation
- contributing to the mutual and international recognition of diplomas

Clear positioning and relations with stakeholders

- positioning of NVAO based on mission and core values
- making explicit the balance between independent, clear and - if necessary - critical judgements on the one hand and promoting and facilitating the content of continuous quality improvement on the other hand
- external communication and a more public stance to realise the desired positioning and stakeholder relations, including the use of social media
- executing the covenant with the Inspectorate of Education
- continue with transparent reporting, in terms of both finance and content
- good relations with the Flemish and Dutch evaluation organisations

Internal organisation NVAO

- adapting the office organisation to new/changing activities
- further development of a top-notch NVAO quality culture, including renewed international certification
- continuous professionalisation of all staff members
- frequent testing of internal and external work on strategic objectives through slim but efficient internal quality assurance
- making use of the strategic objectives as criteria for taking on additional tasks and (international) projects
- linking internal and external communication with this strategic policy plan

FINALLY

For NVAO, the 2012 - 2016 strategy means a different positioning. Whereas in the past few years the emphasis has been on executing primary tasks and assessing whether or not standards of basis quality have been met, the emphasis in the coming years will be placed on two axes: on the assessment of future-oriented quality assurance within the institutions and predominantly past programme results on the one hand and the promotion of a culture of quality and quality improvement on the other hand. This positioning calls for authoritative assessments and authoritative advice. In doing so, NVAO will claim a place for itself in the public debate, aimed at providing sound information on the one hand and thorough analyses and recommendations on the other.

This new positioning is not formulated for the greater good and glory of NVAO. No, it fits the aspirations of the Flemish and Dutch governments, of the Flemish and Dutch institutions of higher education and those of their students, as well as those of the labour markets in both regions in order to offer the best possible higher education to a great diversity of students in a fast changing labour market. To all these aspirations and objectives, external quality assurance ought to contribute!

Attachment 6 Internal Quality Assurance - Quality scheme per domain - an example

Domain ¹² : Policy, Strategy and Leadership						Period : 2010-2011	Controller: L.Bollaert
Nr	Target ¹³	Actions for improvement ¹⁴	Indicator ¹⁵	Resources ¹⁶	Deadline ¹⁷	Owner ¹⁸	Realisation ¹⁹ Chair/Board
I.	Internationalisation						
I.1	New policy plan Internationalisation	Development new policy plan Internationalisation	Approval policy plan Internationalisation	Time and discussions	End 2010	Working group Internationalisation	Board
I.2	Improving Communication internally & externally	Drawing newsletters Drawing newsflashes internally Extending involvement in Interationalisation	Produced newsletters Reports on intranet per project Internal employee in x projects	webstek intranet projectresources	3x/a year (2 in 2010) Every project 2010 2011	Project coordinators Internationalisation	LB
Nr	Target	Actions for improvement	Indicator	Resources	Deadline	Owner	Realisation Chair/Board
II.	Cooperation NL - FL						
II.1	Associate degree programmes	Embedding Associate degree programmes in the accreditation cycle	Timeline Number of applications	Subsidization	End 2010?	HP & RB?	RD
II.2	HBO5-programmes	Assessment HBO5-opleidingen	Pilots completed Protocols Number of applications	FL grant 100.000 VL budget	End 2010 End 2010 Juni 2011	JB	LB
II.3	Automatic mutual	Involved in progress and	DFG	FL	2010	GL & LB	Board

¹² Domain or quality area is a defined part of the organizational process that is subject to internal quality assurance

¹³ Targets are the elaborations of the strategic and operational objectives of NVAO in the current period

¹⁴ Actions for improvement are concrete planned action that follows from the targets

¹⁵ Indicators show when the target is achieved.

¹⁶ Resources: like budget, time, information or required meetings

¹⁷ Deadline is the final date of achievement

¹⁸ Owner is the person or group responsible for the result

¹⁹ Realisation: the finale responsibility is lodged with the board, one of its member or the managing director

	recognition degrees NL & VL	preparation Decision Flemish Government (DFG)					
		Involved in progress and preparation list of equivalence	Treaty & list of equivalence	FL	2011	Board	AB
II.4	More visibility of NVAO	New communication plan To approve	Communication plan 3 publication Q&A?	Own resources & Sponsoring	Juni 2010 End 2010	KD & GL & staff communication	Board
		Direct contact with institutions / programmes and quality Assurance agencies	5 visites 3 meetings 4 Seminars / workshops	Own & subsidization & sponsoring	2010-04-12 2011	Board Policy advisors	Board
Nr	Target	Actions for improvement	Indicator	Resources	Deadline	Owner	Realisation Chair/Board
III	New Accreditation System (NAS)						
III.1	NAS NL	Preparing NAS NL	Execution preparation plan	own	2010	New coordinator	Board
		Implementation NAS NL	# institutional audit # programme accreditation	NL subsidization	2011	New coordinator Policy advisors	Board
III.2	NAS FL	Preparing NAS VL	Preliminary draft Act	own	2010	GL & LB	Board
III.3	Academisation FL	Assessment programmes	# decisions	FL subsidization	2010	Policy advisors	Board
Nr	Target	Actions for improvement	Indicator	Resources	Deadline	Owner	Realisation Chair/Board
IV.	General strategic goals						
III.4	Strategic plan	Approval new strategic plan	New strategic plan	own	End 2010	Board	Board
IV.1	System wide analysis	Preparation of a structural, internal process	Proces description	Own	End 2010	SWIFT (Information system)	Board
		Implementation	1 ^{ste} new analysis	ICT	Spring 2011	HB & working groep ICT	Board
IV.2	(Initial) accreditation	Preparation relevant	indicators	Subsidized	End 2010?	HP	RD

		indicators		operation			
IV.3	Evaluation among stakeholders	Extending systematic evaluation among stakeholders and follow up procedure	Questionnaires quality criteria	ICT Meetings	End 2010?	HP	LB
		Implementation	Discussion evaluation results	Subsidized operation	2011	HP	Board
Nr	Target	Actions for improvement	Indicator	Resources	Deadline	Owner	Realisation Chair/Board
V.	Internal operation core processes & IQA	Approval new organisational chart and operation	Approval	Subsidized operation	2010	LK	Board
V.1	Internal operation	Approval new organisational chart and operation	Approval	Subsidized operation	2010	LK	Board
V.2	ICT	Further development ICT-architecture	Approval contract award	Subsidized operation	End 2010	GL & RD & HB & working groep ICT	Board
V.3	Quality & Strategic Statement	New Quality & Strategic Statement	Approval	Subsidized operation	End 2010	LB & HP & working groep IQA	Board

Attachment 7 Internal Quality Assurance - Report of progress per domain - an example (to be completed in Spring 2012)

Report of progress <i>BELEID, STRATEGIE en LEIDERSCHAP</i>					
Quality area	year	First responsible	Document number in the Quality Manual		
Strategy, Policy and Leadership	2010-2011	LB in consultation with the Executive Board	To be determined		
Global strategic objectives (P)	Specific aims (P)	Results (D)	Documents (C)	Discussion (C)	Goals for improvement & Plans 2012-2013 (A)
1. Internationalisation	1a. New policy plan Internationalisation	1a Approved by the Executive board on 25January 2011	1 1a. 'Actieplan Internationalisering 2011'		1a.
	1b. Improving Communication internally & externally	1b. -Newsletters, including Internationalisation, were published and sent to NL and FL HE institutions. -On NVAO intranet activities of Internationalisation are reported on a regular basis. -NVAO has improved its website in English -Involvement of more NVAO policy advisors in International projects (e.g. Croatia, Armenia, ENQA workshops and seminars)	1b. -NVAO newsletters -NVAO intranet, pages Internationalisation -NVAO website in English		1b

Global strategic objectives (P)	Specific aims (P)	Results (D)	Documents (C)	Discussion (C)	Goals for improvement & Plans 2012-2013 (A)
2. Cooperation NL - FL	2a. Associate degree programmes	2a. Assessment of 70 applications in 2010.	2a. List of NVAO judgments in 2010.		2a.
	2b. HBO5-programmes	2b. A pilot project completed with 5 programmes (17 December 2010)	2b. Report Learning effects, NVAO, December 2010		2b.
	2c. Automatic mutual recognition degrees NL & VL.	Involved in progress and preparation Decision Flemish Government (DFG) Involved in progress and preparation list of equivalence	2c		2c.
	2d. More visibility of NVAO	Approved Communication plan by the Executive Board, 2 June 2010	2d. Communication plan, 2 June 2010		2d.
Global strategic objectives (P)	Specific aims (P)	Results (D)	Documents (C)	Discussion (C)	Goals for improvement & Plans 2012-2013 (A)
3. New Accreditation System (NAS)	3a NAS NL	3a. Implementation of the new accreditation system on 1 January 2011	3a. Approved new Frameworks (2010)		3a.
	3b. NAS FL	3b. Planned implementation of the new accreditation system per September 2013	3b Current planning scheme, Spring 2012		3a+b.
	3c. Academisation FL	3c. NVAO assessed XX applications regarding Academisation in 2010 and 2011	3c. List of NVAO judgments in 2010 and 2011.		3c.

Global strategic objectives (P)	Specific aims (P)	Results (D)	Documents (C)	Discussion (C)	Goals for improvement & Plans 2012-2013 (A)
4. General strategic goals	4a. Strategic plan	4a. Approved by the General Board on 19 February 2012	4a. NVAO strategic plan, 19 th February 2012		4a.
	4b. System wide analysis	4b. -NVAO completed eight SWA in recent years.	4b. Eight reports		4b.
	4c. (Initial) accreditation	Preparation relevant indicators	4c. XX		4c.
	4d. Evaluation among stakeholders	4d. Evaluation scheme approved by the Executive board in April 2011. This scheme is applied currently.	4d. Evaluation scheme, April 2011		
Global strategic objectives (P)			Documents (C)	Discussion (C)	Goals for improvement & Plans 2012-2013 (A)
5. Internal operation core processes & IQA	5a. Internal operation	5a. A new organizational chart is approved and implemented in February 2011.	5a. Organisational chart, February 2011		5a..
	5b. ICT	5b. The new information system SWIT is in operation since January 2012	5b. XX		5b.
	5c. Quality & Strategic Statement	5c. Approved by the General Board on 19 February 2012	5c. NVAO strategic plan, 19 th February 2012		

Attachment 8 Internal Quality Assurance - Evaluation scheme - April 2011

Process	Aim	Target group	Executed by	Instrument	Frequency and time	Responsible for task	Related SG ENQA and ECA
Institutional audit	First feedback, improving approach and process institutional audit	Level in the institution: Board	Board and Procescoordinator	Meeting: together with the evaluation of (initial) accreditation	After the completion of the institutional audit. Other important topics can be discussed as well.	Board and procescoordinator	
Institutional audit	First feedback, improving approach and process institutional audit and new accreditation system	Resonance group	Board	Meeting Resonance group	Twice a year	Board and chair Resonance group: Paul Rullmann	
Accreditation	Improving the content and process of accreditation	Level in the institution: Faculty management	Procescoordinator	Questionnaire (in consultation with the NVAO Board)	Maximum once a year (and not to apply for institutions that apply for an institutional audit in the same year). A sample is used here	Coördinator IQA HP Communication IJvH	4, 8, 9, 10, 13, 15, 16
Accreditation	Reinforcement contact Flemish institutions Reinforcement image NVAO Improvement content and process accreditation	Level in the institution: Managing director Education and Quality Assurance coordinator (Flanders)	1.Team (FL/NL) policy advisors NvS & FW, possibly supervised by a board member 2.Team policy advisors and board members	1.Meetings structured by prepared evaluation questions 2.Information meetings in Flanders	Spring 2011	Portfolio holder (LB)	4, 8, 9, 10, 13, 15, 16
Initial accreditation	Improvement content and process initial accreditation	Level in the institution: Faculty management or programme coordinator	Policy advisor / procescoordinator	Questionnaire (in consultation with the NVAO Board)	After the completion of the process of initial accreditation (and not to apply for institutions that apply for an institutional audit in the same year).	Coördinator IQA HP Communication IJvH	4, 8, 9, 10, 13, 15, 16
	Quality of the panel members, student included	Policy advisor / procescoordinator	Policy advisor / procescoordinator	List with attention points is added to the memorandum of the application that is offered to the board when a decision has to be taken	After every procedure initial accreditation	Coördinator IQA HP	4, 8, 9, 10, 13, 15, 16

Process	Aim	Target group	Executed by	Instrument	Frequency and time	Responsible for task	Related SG ENQA and ECA
(Initial) accreditation or institutional audit	Quality external secretaries	External secretaries	proces-coordinator	List with attention points is added to the memorandum of the application that is offered to the board when a decision has to be taken and a evaluation form has to be filled in	After every procedure (initial) accreditation or institutional audit	Coördinator IQA HP	4, 8, 9, 10, 13, 15, 16
Communication	Image research	Level in the institution: Faculty management, Head department, Quality Assurance coordinators on different levels	Staff Communication	Questionnaire (in consultation with the NVAO Board) Is part of the meeting between the institutional board and NVAO board	Every 5 years	Coördinator communication IJvH	8, 9, 10
Communication	Improvement internal communication and commitment to NVAO	All staf of NVAO	Staff Communication	Evaluation employee satisfaction (in consultation with the NVAO Board)	Every 2 years	Staff management and support IJvH	8, 9, 10
Internationalisation	Improvement international processes and activities	National en international structural partners	Policy advisors Internationalisation	Questionnaire (in consultation with the NVAO Board)	Once a year	Coördinator Internationalisation MF	11
Internationalisation	Feedback on the objectives, improvement processes and activities regarding the certificate Internationalisation	Level in the institution: Programme director and coördinator internationalisation	Policy advisors Internationalisation	Meeting	After completion of every application for a certificate internationalisation	Coördinator Internationalisation MF	11
Research masters	Operation committees Royal Academy of Sciences, students included	Chairs committees Royal Academy of Sciences	Portfolio holder and responsible policy advisor	Meeting with the chairs of the committee based on prepared questions	Two years meeting with the chairs of the committees (after the completion of every application round)	Portfolio holder KD KD en FM	4, 8, 9, 10, 13, 15, 16
Training secretaries	Quality training	Secretaries that attended the training	trainer	Questionnaire	After every training	Coördinator IQA HP	

Attachment 9 Key figures higher education the Netherlands and Flanders

Table I: Overview of key figures of higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders (2009-2010)

Variables / Countries / Total	The Netherlands	Flanders	Total
Inhabitants	16.750.000	6.250.000	23.000.000
Universities	14	6	20
Universities of applied sciences (NL) and University colleges (FL)	41	21	62
Recognised private institutions (NL) and Registered institutions (FL)	60	3	
Other statutory registered institutions (FL)		4	
Programmes	3500	1400	4900
Fulltime students	635.000	195.000	830.000

Table II: Total enrolment higher education in the Netherlands

Enrolment 2009-2010 (x 1000)	Male	Female	Total
Professional Education	193,5	209,6	403,1
Academic Education	114,3	119,0	233,3
Total	304,3	329,7	634,0

Table III: Evolution of enrolment in higher professional education in the Netherlands

Evolution of Enrolment 2009-2010 (x 1000)	Male	Female	Total
2005 – 2006	170,8	186,0	356,8
2006 – 2007	175,1	191,6	366,7
2007 – 2008	178,5	195,8	374,4
2008 – 2009	184,2	199,5	383,7
2009 – 2010	193,5	209,6	403,1

Table IV: Evolution of enrolment in academic education in the Netherlands

Evolution of Enrolment 2009-2010 (x 1000)	Male	Female	Total
2005 – 2006	103,2	102,7	205,9
2006 – 2007	103,4	105,2	208,6
2007 – 2008	104,6	108,2	212,7
2008 – 2009	108,0	112,5	220,5
2009 – 2010	114,3	119,0	233,3

Table V: Total enrolment higher education in Flanders

Enrolment 2009-2010 (x 1000)	Male	Female	Total
Professional Education	37,6	52,2	89,8
Academic Education	50,6	52,7	103,3
Total	88,2	104,9	193,1

Table VI: Evolution of enrolment in higher professional education in Flanders

Evolution of Enrolment 2009-2010 (x 1000)	Male	Female	Total
2005 – 2006	46,9	55,5	102,4
2006 – 2007	46,8	55,7	102,5
2007 – 2008	47,8	56,4	104,2
2008 – 2009	50,5	59,3	109,8
2009 – 2010	53,7	62,9	116,6

Table VII: Evolution of enrolment in academic education in Flanders

Evolution of Enrolment 2009-2010 (x 1000)	Male	Female	Total
2005 – 2006	26,5	32,7	59,2
2006 – 2007	27,3	33,5	60,8
2007 – 2008	28,7	35,6	64,3
2008 – 2009	32,3	39,4	71,7
2009 – 2010	34,6	42,0	76,6

Sources:

1. [Structuur decreet, 4 April 2003];
2. *Flemish education in figures, 2009-2010, Flemish authorities Education and Training policy area;*
3. [Jaarboek Onderwijs in cijfers CBS, 2009, 2010 en 2011];
4. www.vsnv.nl
5. www.vlir.be;
6. www.vlhora.be;
7. www.nvao.net.

Attachment 10 Follow-up of the recommendations of the review committee 2007 regarding the accreditation systems in the Netherlands and Flanders

The review committee of 2007 recommended to several issues regarding the higher education system and the accreditation system in the Netherlands and Flanders. The recommendations concern the following topics:

The Committee recommend further harmonization of regulations and procedures between the two countries with regard to:

Legal protection of titles

- In Flanders it is forbidden by law to provide bachelor's or master's programmes or degrees in case of non-accredited programmes. The degrees of academic programmes have the addition Arts or Science. The degrees of professional bachelor's programmes have no addition.
- In the Netherlands the Veerman committee recommended on the introduction of clear titles for all bachelor's and master's programmes in academic and professional higher education. The recommendations were adopted by the Dutch Minister in his strategic statement (2011). The institution chooses an addition to the title that fits to the profile of the programme. The programme will be accountable on this matter during the accreditation procedure at NVAO. When this proposal is finalized into law, the additions Arts and Sciences will be no longer exclusive for academic programmes. Professional programmes that opt for the addition Arts or Sciences must prove the appropriateness of these additions during the accreditation procedure.
- The Dutch minister is looking for legal sanctions against institutions that offer non-accredited bachelor's - and master's programmes.

Sanctions in the case of a negative accreditation. The Flemish system (of a statutory repair period) should also be implemented in the Dutch system

- Since the introduction of the new accreditation system in the Netherlands on 1 January 2011 a recovery period of two years has been included in the system. NVAO is authorized to grant this period in case of a negative assessment report (regarding accreditation), that can improve sufficiently in two years.

The position of the macro-efficiency check

- In 2009 the Dutch Minister decided to reverse the procedure macro-efficiency check and the procedure initial accreditation. From then on applications for new programmes aiming at funding have to pass the procedure Macro-efficiency check first (at CDHO²⁰) and secondly, in case of a positive decision from the Minister, these programme can apply for the procedure initial accreditation at NVAO.

The length of the accreditation cycles

- The length the accreditation cycles in the Netherlands and in Flanders differ since the start of the Dutch-Flemish cooperation in higher education in 2003; six years in the Netherlands, eight years in Flanders. NVAO has addressed this topic in the meetings of both Ministers [*Comité van Ministers*] in the recent years. It is foreseen that the third round of accreditation in Flanders (from 2021 on) will offer an accreditation cycle of six years.

The scale of assessments. The outcome of the system would benefit if there were clustered assessments on a bi-national scale

- Clustered assessments are current practice in Flanders and in the Netherlands regarding the assessment of academic programmes. The assessment of professional programmes in the Netherlands lost the cluster approach in the first phase of the accreditation system. The government prefers, supported by NAVO, to reintroduce the cluster approach in professional higher education. Initiatives have been taken meanwhile and it has been decided that the cluster assessment will be reintroduced. Cluster assessments on a bi-national scale are not planned in the near future. The main objection of a bi-national scale approach is logistical; the number of involved programmes would be mostly too high, which causes a very long turnaround of the assessment process.

²⁰ CDHO [*Commissie Doelmatigheid Hoger Onderwijs*] is an independent advisory body of the Dutch Minister of Education, Culture en Sciences.

Different time limits for the processing of applications and differing the sanctions (in case NVAO does not adhere to the time limit)

- In the recent years the time limits regarding the treatment of applications did not change in the Netherlands and Flanders. In the Netherlands the time limit is six months for an application Initial Accreditation, in Flanders it is four months. In the Netherlands the time limit is three months for an application accreditation, in Flanders it is four months. In the past years these time limits did not cause a lot problems, but it must be stated that NVAO could not always respect these time limits, mainly due to the very high workload as a consequence of several additional tasks. Since 1st October 2009 in the Netherlands the Act Penalty [*Wet Dwangsom*] is applicable, which obliges every government organisation to complete applications in time. Up till now NVAO has not been punished in the cases that deadlines of applications have not been respected.
In Flanders the programmes have to apply for accreditation at least two months after the public assessment report and six months before the end of the previous accreditation.

The relationship between NVAO and the quality assessment agencies. There is an issue of 'low trust' that needs to be adjusted

- The relation between the quality assurance agencies and NVAO is influenced by the design of the accreditation system in the Netherlands. The assessment agencies operate on a private basis and are commissioned by the institutions. Furthermore, the system in the first phase lacked a recovery period, which sometimes caused anticipatory behaviour of the assessment panels; it seemed that negative judgements were avoided to prevent the programme from serious continuity problems, because a negative decision would mean a shutdown of the programme. As mentioned, in the new system in the Netherlands a recovery period has been introduced, which is supported by all stakeholders. Moreover, in the new accreditation system in NL, the panels will be appointed by NVAO and act on behalf of and reimbursed by NVAO. The institutions will reimburse NVAO.
- In Flanders the four party platform (of VIR, VLHORA, the Flemish cabinet and NVAO) aims at reinforcing the relationship between NVAO and its primary stakeholders. For instance, NVAO will advise VLUHR on the composition of the panels.

The further development of the system. The committee suggest looking into the concept of self-accrediting institutions.

- The design of the new accreditation system in the Netherlands might provide a first step towards self accrediting institutions, but that will be decided in about five years. The institutional audit is a new element of the system that offers opportunities to learn regarding the concept of institutional accreditation. However, the actual opinion among the stakeholders includes a preference for programme assessment as a necessary element of the accreditation system. Especially students are strong proponents of programme assessment.
- The first concepts of the new Flemish accreditation system introduce the institutional review. The provisional outlines of the system in the third phase offer the possibility of self accrediting institutions.

Attachment 11 Accreditation Frameworks in the Netherlands and Flanders

Assessment frameworks for the higher education accreditation system

22 November 2011



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1 Structure of the system

Accreditation takes place at the programme level. Thus, the accreditation system continues to focus on the quality of individual programmes. In addition, institutions may request NVAO to conduct a so-called institutional quality assurance assessment. Should such a thorough audit reveal that an institution's quality assurance is in such good order that the quality of the programmes is systematically improved, wherever necessary, NVAO will then place that institution in a different accreditation regime. The accreditation methods practised under this regime differ from those implemented for programmes without a positive institutional quality assurance assessment. Under this regime, an assessment panel of independent experts assesses each programme on a limited number of standards pertaining to the essence of educational quality. On the basis of this assessment, NVAO decides whether or not to accredit that programme. This leaves the teaching staff free to devote their attention and energy to expert suggestions for improvement relating to the core of their teaching, rather than spending time on pre-conditional aspects that are better dealt with at the institutional level, as the trustworthiness of the institution regarding those themes has already been demonstrated at the institutional level. This is a system in which:

- a. institutional quality assurance assessments bolster an institution-wide internal quality culture;
- b. programme accreditations focus on the essence of the education provided: (improving) substantive quality;
- c. a proper balance is achieved between assessing programmes on the one hand and quality improvement on the other.

The accreditation system comprises six assessment frameworks:

1. an institutional-level framework to be used for "institutional quality assurance assessments"¹, the so-called **institutional quality assurance assessment**;
2. a programme-level framework with "limited assessment criteria for the accreditation of institutions whose institutional quality assurance assessment produced a positive result"², the so-called **limited programme assessment**;
3. a programme-level framework with "extensive assessment criteria for accreditations"³, the so-called **extensive programme assessment** (required if an institutional quality assurance assessment turns out negative and for institutions that have not applied for an institutional quality assurance assessment);
4. a programme-level framework with "limited assessment criteria for the initial accreditation of new programmes provided by institutions whose institutional quality assurance assessment produced a positive result"⁴, the so-called **limited initial accreditation**;
5. a programme-level framework with "extensive assessment criteria for the initial accreditation of new programmes"⁵, the so-called **extensive initial accreditation** (required if an institutional quality assurance assessment turns out negative and for institutions that have not applied for an institutional quality assurance assessment);
6. an assessment framework to determine whether an institution or a programme has any **distinctive features**.⁶

1 Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW), Articles 5a.13a - 13e.

2 Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW), Article 5a.13f.

3 Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW), Article 5a. 8.

4 Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW), Article 5a.13g.

5 Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW), Article 5a. 10a.

6 Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW), Article 5a.10.

The five chapters below present the first five assessment frameworks. The following is successively outlined for each of the assessment frameworks: its set-up, the framework itself, the composition of the audit panel or the assessment panel, the elements of the assessment process, the decisions to be taken by NVAO and the minimum documentation required. Chapter 7 outlines the background and the criteria that apply to the award of a distinctive feature. Chapter 8 defines the assessment scales that apply to (extensive and limited) programme assessments and presents examples for the operationalisation of said scales. Chapter 9 encompasses the assessment rules.

The document at hand concludes by outlining the appeal procedures.

Justification

The frameworks have been formulated on the basis of the European guidelines for the internal quality assurance of higher education institutions. These guidelines are presented in Chapter 2 of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* ('European Standards and Guidelines'; ESG) of the European network for quality assurance agencies, the European Association for Quality Assurance (ENQA). In 2005, this document was adopted by the education ministers during their meeting in Bergen. NVAO has established that the requirements with regard to institutional quality assurance assessment, set by the Minister of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) in his memorandum *Focus op quality* [Focus on Quality], are in excellent alignment with the ESG.⁷ NVAO has translated and rearranged the ESG in order to shift the focus from quality assurance to quality enhancement.

⁷ Dutch Lower Chamber, meeting year 2007–2008, 31 288 and 28 879, no. 21. Cf. *Het Hoogste Goed, Strategische agenda voor het hoger onderwijs-, onderzoeks- en wetenschapsbeleid* [The Greatest Good, strategic agenda for higher education, research and science policy], Parliamentary Document 2007-2008, 31288, no. 1.

2 Institutional quality assurance assessment

2.1 Set-up

The object of the institutional quality assurance assessment is to determine whether the board of an institution has implemented an effective quality assurance system, based on its vision of the quality of the education provided, which enables it to guarantee the quality of the programmes offered. Institutional quality assurance assessments are not expressly aimed at assessing the quality of individual programmes.

In essence, institutional quality assurance assessments revolve around five coherent questions:

1. What is the vision of the institution with regards to the quality of the education it provides?
2. How does the institution intend to realise this vision?
3. How does the institution gauge the extent to which the vision is realised?
4. How does the institution work on improvement?
5. Who is responsible for what?

These five questions have been translated into five standards. Regarding each of these five standards, the audit panel gives a weighted and substantiated judgement on a three-point scale: meets, does not meet or partially meets the standard. The audit panel subsequently gives a substantiated final conclusion on the question of whether an institution is in control with regard to the quality of its programmes. This judgement is also given on a three-point scale: positive, negative or conditionally positive.

2.2 Assessment framework for institutional quality assurance assessments

Vision of the quality of the education provided

Standard 1: *The institution has a broadly supported vision of the quality of its education and the development of a quality culture.*

Explanation: This vision pertains to the institution's ambition regarding the quality of its education and its requirements regarding the quality of its programmes. For the purpose of developing a quality culture, the board of the institution encourages the programmes to monitor their quality and implement improvements wherever required. An active role by all those involved in the education provided is vitally important to this end.

Judgement: Meets, does not meet or partially meets the standard (weighted and substantiated).

Policy

Standard 2: *The institution pursues an adequate policy in order to realise its vision of the quality of its education. This comprises at least: policies in the field of education, staff, facilities, accessibility and feasibility for students with a functional disability, embedding of research in the education provided, as well as the interrelation between education and the (international) professional field and discipline.*

Explanation: The policy fields to be assessed are not limited to those stated in the standard but depend on the institution's vision of the quality of its education. Adequate policy presupposes concrete objectives ensuing from said vision and allocation of sufficient resources to implement said policy. Anchoring research in the education provided is important because all higher education institutions have to engage in research to some extent, even if they do not conduct research themselves and only wish to inform students of new scientific developments in the domain of the programme in which they are enrolled. This standard expressly does not involve an assessment of the research itself.

Judgement: Meets, does not meet or partially meets the standard (weighted and substantiated).

Output

Standard 3: *The institution has insight into the extent to which its vision of the quality of its education is realised. It gauges and evaluates the quality of its programmes on a regular basis, among students, staff, alumni and representatives of the professional field.*

Explanation: The institution has management information with regard to the implementation of policy and the output of its programmes. It also has an adequate system of internal evaluations and external assessments. The evaluation and gauging activities have been set up efficiently and provide the board of the institution with aggregated information. Institution-wide uniformity in the evaluation and gauging activities is not required.

Judgement: Meets, does not meet or partially meets the standard (weighted and substantiated).

Improvement policy

Standard 4: *The institution can demonstrate that it systematically improves the quality of its programmes wherever required.*

Explanation: The institution pursues an active improvement policy based on its insight into the output achieved. This contributes to the quality culture within the institution.

Judgement: Meets, does not meet or partially meets the standard (weighted and substantiated).

Organisation and decision-making structure

Standard 5: *The institution has an effective organisation and decision-making structure with regard to the quality of its programmes, which clearly defines the tasks, authorities and responsibilities and which encompasses the participation of students and staff.*

Explanation: The organisation and decision-making structure enables the institution to realise its vision (standard 1), its policy (standard 2), the output (standard 3) and its improvement policy (standard 4) in a coherent fashion.
The commitment of staff and students is demonstrated by the manner in which they are consulted and the consideration of their recommendations in the programmes. If laid down by law, the assessment of this standard also covers the terms of reference and the positioning of examining boards and programme committees.

Judgement: Meets, does not meet or partially meets the standard (weighted and substantiated).

General judgement

Based on its vision of the quality of the education provided, the board of the institution has implemented an effective quality assurance system, which enables it to guarantee the quality of the programmes offered.

Judgement: Positive, negative or conditionally positive (weighted and substantiated).

If the audit panel pronounces the judgement of conditionally positive, it will explicitly state the relevant conditions.

2.3 Composition of the audit panel

NVAO convenes and appoints an audit panel to conduct the institutional quality assurance assessment. The institution to be assessed is entitled to lodge substantiated objections to the composition of the audit panel.

Audit panels must meet the following requirements:

1. the panel is composed of at least four members, including one student;
2. the panel commands administrative, educational and audit expertise, is acquainted with developments in the higher education sector at home and abroad, and is authoritative;
3. one of the members with administrative expertise will act as chair;
4. the panel is independent (its members have had no ties with the institution to be assessed over at least the past five years).

The audit panel is counselled by an NVAO process co-ordinator and supported by a secretary. The secretary and the process co-ordinator are also independent of the institution in question. The secretary and the process co-ordinator do not sit on the panel.

Prior to the first visit, all panel members and the secretary certify to not maintaining any connections or ties with the institution in question, of either a personal or a professional nature, which could affect an independent judgement in either a positive or a negative sense, and to not having had such connections or ties with the institution during the past five years.

In addition to the factual independence, as expressed above in the nature of the relationship and the number of years, it is essential for any prospective panel member or secretary to feel independent. In some cases, an independence of more than five years may not provide sufficient guarantee for an independent position; a prospective panel member or secretary could still experience too strong a relationship with the institution or, for example, be involved too closely with an institution or programme because of family ties. In such cases, the prospective panel member or secretary cannot sit on the panel. Panel membership requires a professional attitude. To that end, NVAO has formulated a code of conduct for panel members and secretaries. Panel members and secretaries will sign the code of conduct beforehand; after the assessment process, they will sign a declaration drafted by NVAO that the assessment has been carried out independently.

Stakeholders such as panel members, staff or students may report to NVAO any matters arising during the assessment process that could affect the independence of the assessment.

2.4 Assessment process

2.4.1 *Administrative consultation*

NVAO wishes to customise its operations and take account of the diversity in organisational formats, the desired degree of internationalisation of the audit and the specific nature of an institution. For that reason, the assessment process starts off with administrative consultations between the institution and NVAO. These consultations focus on the institution's organisational structure with regard to the education it provides, the possible (international) composition of the audit panel, the language in which the audit must be

conducted, the relevant time frame and the material available in the institution for the purpose of the institutional quality assurance assessment. If so desired, an institution may use the institutional quality assurance assessment to assess the quality assurance of so-called non-degree programmes.

2.4.2 *Accreditation portrait*

Based on the administrative consultations with the institution, NVAO starts off by drawing up an “accreditation portrait”. The accreditation portrait is based on the accreditation decisions NVAO has taken with regard to new and existing programmes during the initial stage of the accreditation system. Any side letters and other information available to NVAO are also factored in. The accreditation portrait is handed over to the audit panel. It is submitted to the institution in question beforehand and the institution is given an opportunity to respond.

2.4.3 *Critical reflection*

The institution draws up a critical reflection. In essence, the critical reflection answers the question of how the institution demonstrates that it is in control of the quality of the programmes offered. The critical reflection follows the standards outlined for the institutional quality assurance assessment framework, whereby the institution’s strengths and weaknesses are described by reference to notable examples. The critical reflection is a self-contained document that can be read separately.

The critical reflection contains a number of basic data on the institution and its programmes. These enable the audit panel to gain a global picture of the institution. (The required basic data are listed in paragraph 2.6.)

When considering the standards, the institution itself is expected to set a course for its vision and policies, whereupon it is up to the audit panel to assess to what extent the institution manages to achieve its ambitions. This means, for example, that an audit panel must check whether an institution whose vision indicates that it wishes to focus on internationalisation of – or in – its programmes not only develops policy and makes resources available to that end but also evaluates and wherever necessary adjusts said policy.

A similar reasoning applies to aspects such as teaching strategies, prior experiential learning, input from the professional field etcetera. If these have been incorporated in the vision and policy regarding the programmes, they should also be covered by the evaluation, the information gathering, an assessment of the quality achieved and measures for improvement, if any.

As for staff and facilities, the institutional quality assurance assessment involves assessing the policy and procedures in place with regard to staff and the facilities rather than their programme-specific realisation. Consequently, the policy and procedures must be specified in the critical reflection. The implementation of policy is considered in the institutional quality assurance assessment but programme-specific substantive matters such as, for example, teachers’ subject expertise are only considered in limited programme assessments. In its assessment, the audit panel limits itself to the institution’s policy regarding the effectiveness of the quality assurance system in place for the programmes. The panel does not judge the quality of the programmes.

For the purpose of describing its output, an institution can include relevant public information, for example from the *Keuzegids* [Guide to Higher Education Courses] or *Studiekeuze123* [www.studychoice.nl].

The critical reflection comprises a maximum of 50 pages; it has very few appendices and any appendices are limited in size. (The required appendices are listed in paragraph 2.6.2.)

2.4.4 *Site visit*

The site visit for the purpose of the institutional quality assurance assessment comprises two components and takes a total of at least two to, in principle, five days. The panel may extend its visit if prompted by the circumstances. As a rule, the audit panel starts off by visiting the institution for a day, followed by a second visit after two to four weeks. The institution and the panel may decide to divert from this set-up by mutual agreement.

First visit: exploration

Prior to the first visit, the audit panel has studied the institution's critical reflection and the accreditation portrait. Prior to its first visit, the panel discusses the questions it intends to put to the discussion partners. During the preliminary meeting, the audit panel also discusses a number of documents underpinning the critical reflection.

The first visit has an exploratory nature. The audit panel gains insight into the ins and outs of the institution, the specific points for attention of the board of the institution and satisfaction among students, teaching staff and other stakeholders. It identifies the topics to be investigated in more detail.

During the first visit, the audit panel will, in any case, meet with the following discussion partners:

- the board of the institution (and, if the institution so desires: a representative from the supervisory board);
- the managers responsible for education;
- quality assurance experts and other relevant staff;
- teachers from representative bodies;
- students from representative bodies;
- if relevant: representatives from the professional field.

The schedule for the visit is drawn up by the NVAO process co-ordinator in consultation with the chair of the audit panel and the contact person of the institution. The panel determines the structure and organisation of the visit. It decides at his own discretion which teachers and which students it would like to see and which documents it would like to examine. In principle, the following pre-conditions are observed:

- The meetings take 45 – 60 minutes.
- In principle, the delegations of the institution comprise no more than six people.
- In between the meetings, the audit panel takes time to deliberate.

In addition, the panel will set aside time for open consultations. The institution and the panel will make these open consultations widely known, both prior to and during the visit.

At the end of the first visit, the chair of the audit panel provides brief feedback information to the institution. This feedback presents the panel's first impressions of the quality assurance in place in the institution. In addition, it indicates the audit trails to be conducted. Audit trails are studies pertaining to the implementation of policy and/or the management of problems,

in which the audit panel follows the trail from the institutional level to the implementation level or vice versa. The audit panel decides which topics to consider in the audit trails and which individuals it would like to see to that end. The institution may point out well-founded other options to the audit panel or request the panel to conduct an additional audit trail. In order to minimise the workload for the institution, the audit panel gives specific instructions regarding the documents to be studied for the audit trails and the required discussion partners.

The institution prepares the second visit in consultation with the NVAO process co-ordinator. The panel ultimately decides on the structure and the organisation of the visit.

Second visit: in-depth study

During the second visit to the institution, a further discussion takes place between the audit panel and representatives of the institution regarding points for attention emerging from the meetings and the documents studied during the first visit. This discussion enables the audit panel to ascertain whether its initial impressions were correct. Again, the delegations of the institution comprise a maximum of, in principle, six persons.

The audit panel needs to demonstrate how it has ascertained whether an institution's quality assurance system works. This is where the audit trails come in. There are vertical and horizontal audit trails. It should be noted in this regard that institutional quality assurance assessments expressly do not involve assessing programmes but rather assessing the functioning of the quality assurance system in relation to the programmes.

In a vertical audit trail, the panel examines to what degree an element of the vision referred to in standard 1 is actually put into practice in two or more programmes. All standards in the framework are considered in succession. For example, the panel may examine whether the intended international exchange of students is actually effected.

Horizontal audit trails focus on the realisation of a single standard (in other words: a component of the quality assurance system) in a number of programmes. For example, the functioning of programme committees or the monitoring of measures for improvement.

At the end of the second visit, the chair of the audit panel provides brief feedback to the institution regarding the general judgement and the underpinning considerations.

2.4.5 Assessment procedure within the audit panel

The audit panel presents a judgement regarding all the standards contained in the assessment framework. This judgement is based on an appraisal of the positive and critical elements in the panel's findings. Options for the judgement are: meets, does not meet or partially meets the standard. Subsequently, the panel formulates a general, weighted and substantiated judgement on the question of whether an institution is in control of the quality of the programmes it offers. That judgement is also given on a three-point scale: positive, negative or conditionally positive.

2.4.6 Advisory report

The audit panel secretary draws up an advisory report comprising 20 to 30 pages. The main content of the report is made up of the panel's judgements regarding the standards. It is important for the audit panel to include underpinnings based on the institution's critical reflection, the meetings with representatives of the institution and the underlying data from the documents studied. For that reason, the advisory report will include notable and representative examples.

The advisory report is preceded by a general consideration of the judgement regarding the institution's quality assurance comprising a maximum of two pages. Any measures for

improvement will be presented in a separate paragraph of the advisory report. In addition, the report contains a score table with the judgements emerging from the institutional quality assurance assessment, information on the dates of the site visits, the names of the discussion partners, a number of basic data concerning the institution (see paragraph 2.6), an overview of the material studied and the declarations of independence signed by the panel members and the secretary. In its report, the panel gives an account of the manner in which it has organised its visit and how it has arrived at its choice of discussion partners and documents.

At the end of the second visit, the contents of the advisory report are discussed and tentatively laid down by the audit panel members.

NVAO forwards the advisory report to the board of the institution once all panel members have approved its contents. The institution is given a term of two weeks to respond to any factual inaccuracies in the report, whereupon the chair of the audit panel endorses the report after all panel members have approved its contents. The report is signed by the chair and the secretary of the panel and submitted to NVAO for decision-making. If NVAO finds that a report raises questions or if an institution so desires, NVAO may invite the institution and/or the audit panel for further consultations.

2.5 NVAO decision-making

A “positive” judgement results in approval by NVAO for a term of six years. This means that the programme assessments may be conducted in accordance with the limited programme assessment framework.

A “conditionally positive” judgement results in approval by NVAO under resolute conditions for a term of one year.⁸ During that year, the programme assessments may be conducted in accordance with the limited programme assessment framework. A positive accreditation decision or a positive initial accreditation decision based on the limited framework will subsequently be valid for one year. When given the “conditionally positive” judgement, the institution must acquire a positive judgement within a year, whereby NVAO ascertains whether the institution meanwhile meets the conditions set. If the institution fails to apply for an additional judgement or does not meet the conditions, the positive judgement expires.

If within that year the institution, in the opinion of NVAO, manages to satisfy the conditions set on the basis of the institutional quality assurance assessment, the validity of a positive accreditation decision or positive initial accreditation decision will be extended to six years.

Satisfaction of the conditions set will be assessed by an audit panel commissioned by NVAO. The additional assessment will basically be carried out in accordance with the procedure for regular institutional quality assurance assessments. The audit panel will focus on the conditions set earlier.⁹

⁸ Article 5a,13d, paragraph 6, Dutch Higher Education and Research Act; Accreditation Decree of the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act.

⁹ Article 5a,13d, paragraph 6 in conjunction with Article 5a,13e of the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act

A “negative” judgement results in the withholding of approval for a minimum period of three years. Any programme assessments will be carried out in accordance with the extensive programme assessments regime. Programmes that have been accredited during the introduction regime based on a limited assessment or have passed initial accreditation must undergo additional assessment if approval is withheld following an institutional quality assurance assessment. The institution must apply to NVAO for such additional assessment. A decision regarding such applications will be taken within three months.

2.6 Required documents

During the assessment process, the institution will provide the audit panel with a limited number of documents. NVAO assumes that these are existing documents, available within the institution, rather than documents prepared especially for the institutional quality assurance assessment. The documents serve as a substantiation and if need be as verification. Other material is only required when explicitly requested by the panel or if the institution wishes to demonstrate a particular distinctive feature.

2.6.1 *Basic data concerning the institution*

(The basic data is incorporated into the critical reflection, the advisory report and the NVAO decision.)

1. Name of the institution;
2. Status of the institution (publicly funded or legal body providing higher education);
3. Location(s);
4. Overview with all programmes, enrolment figures and staff numbers.

2.6.2 *Required appendices to the critical reflection*

(The list with appendices studied will be included in the advisory report.)

1. Mission and/or view regarding the education provided and, if available, the institution's latest strategic policy plan;
2. Organisation chart.

2.6.3 *Documents for inspection during the visits*

(The list with material studied will be included in the assessment report.)

1. Education policy plan or similar document(s);
2. Policy plan regarding research in relation to the programmes offered or similar document(s);
3. Staff (policy) plan or similar document(s);
4. Facilities plan or similar document(s);
5. Policy plan regarding the accessibility and feasibility for students with a functional disability;
6. Quality assurance plan;
7. Summary and analysis of recent evaluation results and relevant management information;
8. Institution's annual report on “appeals against examinations”.

3 Limited programme assessment

3.1 Set-up

The framework for limited assessments of existing programmes is used for institutions that have obtained a positive judgement following an institutional quality assurance assessment. The assessment is based on a discussion with peers regarding the content and quality of the programme. It focuses on three questions:

1. What is the programme aiming for?
2. How is the programme realising this aim?
3. Is the programme achieving its objectives?

These three questions have been translated into three standards. Regarding each of these three standards, an assessment panel gives a substantiated judgement on a four-point scale: unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good or excellent. The panel subsequently gives a substantiated final conclusion regarding the overall quality of the programme, on the same four-point scale.

3.2 Assessment framework for limited programme assessments

Intended learning outcomes

Standard 1: *The intended learning outcomes of the programme have been concretised with regard to content, level and orientation; they meet international requirements.*

Explanation: As for level and orientation (bachelor's or master's; professional or academic), the intended learning outcomes fit into the Dutch qualifications framework. In addition, they tie in with the international perspective of the requirements currently set by the professional field and the discipline with regard to the contents of the programme.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Teaching-learning environment

Standard 2: *The curriculum, staff and programme-specific services and facilities enable the incoming students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.*

Explanation: The contents and structure of the curriculum enable the students admitted to achieve the intended learning outcomes. The quality of the staff and of the programme-specific services and facilities is essential to that end. Curriculum, staff, services and facilities constitute a coherent teaching-learning environment for the students.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Assessment and achieved learning outcomes

Standard 3: *The programme has an adequate assessment system in place and demonstrates that the intended learning outcomes are achieved.*

Explanation: The level achieved is demonstrated by interim and final tests, final projects and the performance of graduates in actual practice or in post-graduate programmes. The tests and assessments are valid, reliable and transparent to the students.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

General conclusion

The quality of the programme is

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

The assessment is based on the following definitions. These definitions relate to both the scores obtained for the individual standards and the overall scores awarded to the programme.

Generic quality

The quality that can reasonably be expected in an international perspective from a higher education bachelor's or master's programme.

Unsatisfactory

The programme does not meet the current generic quality standards and shows serious shortcomings in several areas.

Satisfactory

The programme meets the current generic quality standards and shows an acceptable level across its entire spectrum.

Good

The programme systematically surpasses the current generic quality standards across its entire spectrum.

Excellent

The programme systematically well surpasses the current generic quality standards across its entire spectrum and is regarded as an (inter)national example.

Chapter 8 presents examples for the operationalisation of these assessments.

3.3 Composition of the assessment panel¹⁰

It is imperative that assessment panels are composed in a manner allowing meaningful discussions among peers, in which the panel remains sufficiently independent. The institution convenes the panel, appoints a secretary and subsequently presents the panel to NVAO for approval. To that end the institution provides data on the expertise and independence of the panel members and the secretary, in a manner stipulated by NVAO. The institution may also commission an external quality assessment agency to convene a panel; in such cases the panel must also be presented to NVAO for approval.

The panel secretary has completed NVAO training leading to certification. Every year, NVAO publishes a list of NVAO certified secretaries.

Assessment panels must meet the following requirements.

1. The panel is composed of a minimum of four members, among whom at least two authoritative domain experts¹¹ and a student.
2. Overall, the panel commands the following expertise:
 - a. expertise regarding developments in the discipline,
 - b. international expertise,

¹⁰ This paragraph is explained in detail in the guideline titled *Eisen aan de panelsamenstelling* [Requirements for the composition of panels]. This guideline contains detailed requirements to be met by panels. It also contains a submission procedure, a form to be filled out by the institution and a code of conduct for panel members.

¹¹ Domain expertise is understood to mean specialist expertise, international expertise or professional expertise.

- c. practical expertise in the professional field relevant to the programme (if applicable),
 - d. experience in teaching and educational development at the relevant programme level and expertise regarding the teaching format(s) used in the programme¹²,
 - e. student-related expertise,
 - f. assessment or audit expertise.
3. The panel is independent (its members have not had any ties with the institution providing the programme for at least the past five years).
 4. The panel is assisted by an independent, external secretary trained and certified by NVAO. The secretary does not sit on the panel.

Prior to the visit, all panel members and the secretary certify to not maintaining any connections or ties with the institution in question, either as a private individual or as a researcher / teacher, professional or adviser, which could affect an independent judgement of the quality of the programme in either a positive or a negative sense, and to not having had such connections or ties with the institution during the past five years.

In addition to the factual independence, as expressed above in the nature of the relationship and the number of years, it is essential for any panel member or secretary to feel independent.

Panel members and secretaries will sign a declaration of independence and confidentiality prior to the assessment process. In this declaration, they attest to having taken note of the code of conduct. Following the assessment process, the chair and secretary sign the assessment report once all panel members have read and approved the report. The report includes a declaration that the assessment has been carried out independently.

Stakeholders such as panel members, staff or students may report to NVAO any matters arising during the assessment process that could affect the independence of the assessment or pertain to other complaints regarding the panels or secretaries.

3.4 Assessment process

3.4.1 Critical reflection

For the purpose of the assessment by the assessment panel, the programme presents a critical reflection of the programme. The critical reflection should follow the standards outlined for the limited programme assessment framework and describes the programme's strengths and weaknesses. In its critical reflection, the programme outlines how it checks student and staff satisfaction and reports on the results. Underpinning documents are made available for the panel to inspect. In addition, the report indicates which measures for improvement have been taken following the previous assessment. The critical reflection is a self-contained document that can be read separately.

¹² This includes, for example, distance learning, work-related courses, flexible education, skill-oriented education or education aimed at excellent students.

The assessment framework for limited programme assessments is structured in a manner allowing programmes ample scope to emphasise their unique character. The programme may use that scope in the critical reflection. The critical reflection is the pre-eminent tool to allow teachers and peers to comment on the contents of the programme. Therefore it must be a document in which teachers and students recognise the programme.

In addition, the assessment framework offers opportunities to discuss the ambitions of the programme during the site visit, rather than focus on the results obtained in the past. What choices will the programme make for the future, what direction will it take? In order to conduct such discussions, the assessment panel is expected to be able to reflect on the programme's plans for the future, together with the programme's representatives.

It is imperative that any overlap with assessments within the context of the institutional quality assurance assessment is avoided when drawing up the critical reflection and during the assessment procedure. Should any reference to institutional policy or, for example, departmental policy be necessary, programme assessments strictly focus on the fitness for purpose of the policy pursued regarding the programme in question. This does not include pre-conditional matters, such as the structure of quality assurance or the institution's staff policy; these are considered in institutional quality assurance assessments.

The critical reflection comprises a maximum of 25 pages, excluding appendices.

3.4.2 *Site visit*

In principle, the required site visit for the purpose of a limited programme assessment takes one day. In the event of a collective assessment of comparable programmes within a single institution, the duration may be reduced proportionally.

Prior to the visit, the assessment panel has studied a number of final projects in order to gain insight into the exit level attained in the programme. To that end, a selection is made from a comprehensive overview drawn up by the programme. The final projects, the relevant assessment criteria and the requirements are forwarded to the panel members prior to the visit, or the panel members examine the documents on site prior to the visit. Prior to the visit, the panel members form a preliminary opinion about the programme and draw up questions for their site visit. The panel factors the outcomes of the institutional quality assurance assessment into its judgement.

During the site visit, the assessment panel will, in any case, meet with the programme management, members of the examining board and the programme committee, teachers, students, alumni and wherever relevant representatives of the professional field. In addition, the panel examines the material made available by the programme. The panel determines the exact scope of the discussions, the possible clustering of discussion participants and the further organisation of the visit. The panel decides at its own discretion which teachers and students it would like to see and which documents it would like to examine. In principle, the programme delegations comprise no more than six persons. The panel will set aside time for open consultations. The programme and the panel will make these open consultations widely known, both prior to and during the visit. In addition, the panel may visit lectures or other teaching-learning situations, such in consultation with the programme.

At the end of the site visit, the chair of the assessment panel provides brief feedback information to the programme regarding the general judgement and the underlying considerations.

3.4.3 *Assessment procedure within the assessment panel*

The assessment panel presents its judgement regarding all the standards incorporated in the assessment framework. This judgement is substantiated by an appraisal of the positive and critical elements from the panel's findings. The judgement may be: unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good or excellent. The panel subsequently formulates a general, weighted and substantiated judgement regarding the quality of the programme. This judgement is also given on a four-point scale, ranging from unsatisfactory to excellent.

3.4.4 *Assessment report*

The assessment panel secretary draws up an assessment report comprising some 20 pages. The main content of the report features the panel's judgements regarding the standards. It is important for the audit panel to include underpinnings based on the programme's critical reflection, the meetings with representatives of the programme and the underlying data from the documents made available. The report will include significant and representative examples. In its report, the panel gives an account of the manner in which it has organised its visit and how it has arrived at its choice of discussion partners and documents.

The assessment report is preceded by a summary judgement regarding the quality of the programme comprising a maximum of two pages. Any measures for improvement will be presented in a separate paragraph. In addition, the report contains a score table with the panel judgements, information on the date(s) of the site visit, the names of the discussion partners, basic data concerning the programme (see paragraph 3.6), an overview of the material studied and the declarations of independence signed by the panel members and the secretary.

The assessment panel secretary forwards the advisory report to the board of the institution once all panel members have approved its contents. The institution is given the opportunity to respond to any factual inaccuracies in the report, whereupon the panel chair endorses the report after all panel members have taken note of and approved its contents. The report is signed by the chair and the secretary of the panel.

3.5 **NVAO decision-making**

The board of the institution applies to NVAO for accreditation based on the assessment report. NVAO may decide to accredit the programme, not accredit it or grant an improvement period. The Accreditation Decree of the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act stipulates how, on what grounds and under what circumstances NVAO may grant an improvement period.

Because of the limited nature of the assessment, NVAO exercises more reticence in reviewing the assessment report than it does with extensive programme assessments. The positive assessment of the institution inspires sufficient confidence that the quality assurance regarding the quality of the education provided by the institution is effectively guaranteed. In addition, its prior approval of the assessment panels and the fact that these

panels' secretaries have been trained and certified provides sufficient context and certainty to resort to a more reticent review of the assessment report. The review focuses on the completeness and validity of the assessment report.

3.6 Required documents

During the assessment process, the programme provides the assessment panel with a limited number of documents. NVAO assumes that these are existing documents, available within the institution, rather than documents prepared especially for the programme assessment. The documents serve as a substantiation and if need be as verification. Other material is only required when explicitly requested by the panel or if the programme wishes to demonstrate a particular distinctive feature.

3.6.1 *Basic data concerning the programme*

(The basic data is incorporated into the critical reflection, the assessment report and the NVAO decision.)

Administrative data regarding the programme

1. Nomenclature of the programme in CROHO [central register of higher education programmes];
2. Orientation and level of the programme;
3. Number of credits;
4. Specialisations;
5. Location(s);
6. Mode (s) of study;
7. CROHO registration number.

Administrative data regarding the institution

1. Name of the institution;
2. Status of the institution (publicly funded or legal body providing higher education);
3. Outcome of the institutional quality assurance assessment.

Quantitative data regarding the programme

1. Data on intake, transfers and graduates pertaining to – if possible – the last six cohorts;
2. Teacher -student ratio achieved;
3. Average amount of face-to-face instruction per stage of the study programme (a stage can be expressed in, for example, regular years of study, the work placement and the graduation period).

3.6.2 *Required appendices to the critical reflection*

(The list of appendices studied will be incorporated into the assessment report.)

1. Subject-specific reference framework and the learning outcomes of the programme;
2. Overview of the curriculum in diagram form;
3. Outline description of the curriculum components, stating learning outcomes, attainment targets, teaching method(s), assessment method, literature (mandatory/recommended), teacher and credits;
4. Teaching and examination regulations;

(Items 2 to 4 are usually reflected in a study guide, in which case this can be annexed to the report.)

5. Overview of allocated staff with names, positions, scope of appointment, level and expertise;
6. List of the last 25 final projects or the final projects of the past two years (or portfolios / projects demonstrating the exit levels attained by the students);
7. Overview of the contacts maintained with the professional field (if relevant);
8. Report on the institutional quality assurance assessment.

3.6.3 Documents made available during the visit

(The list of material studied will be incorporated into the assessment report.)

1. Reports on consultations in relevant committees / bodies;
2. Test questions with corresponding assessment criteria and requirements (answer models) and a representative selection of actual tests administered (such as presentations, work placements, portfolio assessments) and assessments;
3. Representative selection of final projects, selected by the panel, of the past two years with corresponding assessment criteria and requirements;
4. Reference books and other learning materials;
5. Summary and analysis of recent evaluation results and relevant management information;
6. Documentation regarding teacher and student satisfaction.

4 Extensive programme assessment

4.1 Set-up

The framework for extensive assessments of existing programmes is used for institutions that have failed to obtain a positive judgement following an institutional quality assurance assessment. The assessment is based on a discussion with peers regarding the content and quality of the programme. It focuses on six questions:

1. What is the programme aiming for?
2. With what curriculum?
3. With what staff?
4. With what services and facilities?
5. How does the programme intend to safeguard quality?
6. Is the programme achieving its objectives?

These six questions have been translated into six themes and 16 standards. Regarding each of these standards, an assessment panel gives a substantiated judgement on a four-point scale: unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good or excellent. The panel subsequently gives a substantiated final conclusion regarding the overall quality of the programme, on the same four-point scale.

4.2 Assessment framework for extensive programme assessments

Intended learning outcomes

Standard 1: *The intended learning outcomes of the programme have been concretised with regard to content, level and orientation; they meet international requirements.*

Explanation: As for level and orientation (bachelor's or master's; professional or academic), the intended learning outcomes fit into the Dutch qualifications framework. In addition, they tie in with the international perspective of the requirements currently set by the professional field and the discipline with regard to the contents of the programme.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Curriculum

Standard 2: *The orientation of the curriculum assures the development of skills in the field of scientific research and/or the professional practice.*

Explanation: The curriculum has demonstrable links with current developments in the professional field and the discipline.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 3: *The contents of the curriculum enable students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.*

Explanation: The learning outcomes have been adequately translated into attainment targets for (components of) the curriculum. Students follow a study curriculum which is coherent in terms of content.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 4: *The structure of the curriculum encourages study and enables students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.*

Explanation: The teaching concept is in line with the intended learning outcomes and the teaching formats tie in with the teaching concept.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 5: *The curriculum ties in with the qualifications of the incoming students.*

Explanation: The admission requirements are realistic with a view to the intended learning outcomes.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 6: *The curriculum is feasible.*

Explanation: Factors pertaining to the curriculum and hindering students' progress are removed as far as possible. In addition, students with functional disabilities receive additional career tutoring.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 7: *The programme meets statutory requirements regarding the scope and duration of the curriculum.*

Explanation: Scope and duration:

- Bachelor's programmes (professional orientation): 240 credits;
- Bachelor's programmes (academic orientation): in principle, a minimum of 180 credits;
- Master's programmes (professional orientation): in principle, a minimum of 60 credits;
- Master's programmes (academic orientation): in principle, a minimum of 60 credits, depending on the programme.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory (weighted and substantiated).

Staff

Standard 8: *The programme has an effective staff policy in place.*

Explanation: The staff policy provides for the qualifications, training, assessment and size of the staff required for the realisation of the curriculum.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 9: *The staff is qualified for the realisation of the curriculum in terms of content, educational expertise and organisation.*

Explanation: The factual expertise available among the staff ties in with the requirements set for professional or academic higher education programmes.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 10: *The size of the staff is sufficient for the realisation of the curriculum.*

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Services and facilities

Standard 11: *The accommodation and the facilities (infrastructure) are sufficient for the realisation of the curriculum.*

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 12: *Tutoring and student information provision bolster students' progress and tie in with the needs of students.*

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Quality assurance

Standard 13: *The programme is evaluated on a regular basis, partly on the basis of assessable targets.*

Explanation: The programme ensures the quality of the intended learning outcomes, the curriculum, the staff, the services and facilities, the assessments and the learning outcomes achieved through regular evaluations. The programme also collects management information regarding the success rates and the staff-student ratio.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 14: *The outcomes of these evaluations constitute the basis for demonstrable measures for improvement that contribute to the realisation of the targets.*

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 15: *Programme committees, examining boards, staff, students, alumni and the relevant professional field of the programme are actively involved in the programme's internal quality assurance.*

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Assessment and learning outcomes achieved

Standard 16: *The programme has an adequate assessment system in place and demonstrates that the intended learning outcomes are achieved.*

Explanation: The level achieved is demonstrated by interim and final tests, final projects and the performance of graduates in actual practice or in subsequent programmes. The tests and assessments are valid, reliable and transparent to the students.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

General conclusion

The quality of the programme is

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

The assessment is based on the following definitions. These definitions relate to both the scores obtained for the individual standards and the overall scores awarded to the programme.

Generic quality

The quality that can reasonably be expected in an international perspective from a higher education bachelor's or master's programme.

Unsatisfactory

The programme does not satisfy the current generic quality standards and shows serious shortcomings in several areas.

Satisfactory

The programme satisfies the current generic quality standards and shows an acceptable level across its entire spectrum.

Good

The programme systematically surpasses the current generic quality standards across its entire spectrum.

Excellent

The programme systematically well surpasses the current generic quality standards across its entire spectrum and is regarded as an (inter)national example.

Chapter 8 presents examples for the operationalisation of these assessments.

4.3 Composition of the assessment panel¹³

It is imperative that assessment panels are composed in a manner allowing meaningful discussions among peers, in which the panel remains sufficiently independent. The institution convenes the panel, appoints a secretary and subsequently presents the panel to NVAO for approval. To that end the institution provides data on the expertise and independence of the panel members and the secretary, in a manner stipulated by NVAO. The institution may also commission an external quality assessment agency to convene a panel; in such cases the panel must also be presented to NVAO for approval.

The panel secretary has completed NVAO training leading to certification. Every year, NVAO publishes a list of NVAO certified secretaries.

Assessment panels must meet the following requirements.

¹³ This paragraph is explained in detail in the guideline titled *Eisen aan de panelsamenstelling* [Requirements for the composition of panels]. This guideline contains detailed requirements to be met by panels. It also contains a submission procedure, a form to be filled out by the institution and a code of conduct for panel members.

1. The panel is composed of a minimum of four members, among whom at least two authoritative domain experts¹⁴ and a student.
2. Overall, the panel commands the following expertise:
 - a. expertise regarding developments in the discipline,
 - b. international expertise,
 - c. practical expertise in the professional field relevant to the programme (if applicable),
 - d. experience in teaching and educational development at the relevant programme level and expertise regarding the teaching format(s) used in the programme¹⁵,
 - e. student-related expertise,
 - f. assessment or audit expertise.
3. The panel is independent (its members have not had any ties with the institution providing the programme for at least the past five years).
4. The panel is assisted by an independent, external secretary trained and certified by NVAO. The secretary does not sit on the panel.

Prior to the visit, all panel members and the secretary certify to not maintaining any connections or ties with the institution in question, either as a private individual or as a researcher / teacher, professional or adviser, which could affect an independent judgement of the quality of the programme in either a positive or a negative sense, and to not having had such connections or ties with the institution during the past five years.

In addition to the factual independence, as expressed above in the nature of the relation and the number of years, it is essential for any panel member or secretary to feel independent. In some cases, an independence of more than five years may not provide sufficient guarantee for an independent position; a prospective panel member or secretary could still experience too strong a relationship with the institution or be involved too closely with an institution or programme, for example because of family ties. In such cases, the prospective panel member or secretary cannot sit on the panel. Panel membership requires a professional attitude. To that end, NVAO has formulated a code of conduct for panel members and secretaries. This code of conduct comprises elements pertaining to the independence, confidentiality and attitude of the panel members and the secretary during the assessment process.

Panel members and secretaries will sign a declaration of independence and confidentiality prior to the assessment process. In this declaration, they attest to having taken note of the code of conduct. Following the assessment process, the chair and secretary sign the assessment report once all panel members have read and approved the report. The report includes a declaration that the assessment has been carried out independently.

¹⁴ Domain expertise is understood to mean specialist expertise, international expertise or professional expertise.

¹⁵ This includes, for example, distance learning, work-related courses, flexible education, skill-oriented education or education aimed at excellent students.

Stakeholders such as panel members, staff or students may report to NVAO any matters arising during the assessment process that could affect the independence of the assessment or pertain to other complaints regarding the panels or secretaries.

4.4 Assessment process

4.4.1 Critical reflection

For the purpose of the assessment by the assessment panel, the programme presents a critical reflection of the programme. The critical reflection follows the standards outlined for the limited programme assessment framework and describes the programme's strengths and weaknesses. In its critical reflection, the programme outlines how it checks student and staff satisfaction and reports on the results. Underpinning documents are made available for the panel to inspect. In addition, the report indicates which measures for improvement have been taken following the previous assessment. The critical reflection is a self-contained document that can be read separately.

The critical reflection is the pre-eminent tool to allow teachers and peers to comment on the contents of the programme. Therefore, it must be a document in which teachers and students recognise the programme.

In addition, the assessment framework offers opportunities to discuss the ambitions of the programme during the site visit, rather than focus on the results obtained in the past. What choices will the programme make for the future, what direction will it take? In order to conduct such discussions, the assessment panel is expected to be able to reflect on the programme's plans for the future, together with the programme's representatives.

The critical reflection comprises a maximum of 40 pages, excluding appendices.

4.4.2 Site visit

The required site visit for the purpose of an extensive programme assessment takes about two days. In the event of a collective assessment of comparable programmes within a single institution, the duration may be reduced proportionally.

Prior to the visit, the assessment panel has studied a number of final projects in order to gain insight into the exit level attained in the programme. To that end, a selection is made from a comprehensive overview drawn up by the programme. The final projects, the relevant assessment criteria and the requirements are forwarded to the panel members prior to the visit, or the panel members examine the documents on site prior to the visit. Prior to the visit, the panel members form a preliminary opinion about the programme and draw up questions for their site visit.

During the site visit, the assessment panel will, in any case, meet with the programme management, members of the examining board and the programme committee, teachers, students, alumni and wherever relevant, representatives of the professional field. In addition, the panel examines the material made available by the programme. The panel determines the exact scope of the discussions, the possible clustering of discussion participants and the further organisation of the visit. The panel decides at its own discretion which teachers and students it would like to see and which documents it would like to examine. In principle, the programme delegations comprise no more than six persons. The panel will set aside time for open consultations. The programme and the panel will make

these open consultations widely known, both prior to and during the visit. In addition, the panel may visit lectures or other teaching-learning situations, such in consultation with the programme.

At the end of the site visit, the chair of the assessment panel provides brief feedback information to the programme regarding the general judgement and the underlying considerations.

4.4.3 *Assessment procedure within the assessment panel*

The assessment panel presents its judgement regarding all the standards incorporated in the assessment framework. This judgement is substantiated by an appraisal of the positive and critical elements from the panel's findings. The judgement may be: unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good or excellent. The panel subsequently formulates a general, weighted and substantiated judgement regarding the quality of the programme. This judgement is also given on a four-point scale, ranging from unsatisfactory to excellent.

4.4.4 *Assessment report*

The assessment panel secretary draws up an assessment report comprising some 30 pages. The main content of the report features the panel's judgements regarding the standards. It is important for the audit panel to include underpinnings based on the programme's critical reflection, the meetings with representatives of the programme and the underlying data from the documents made available. The report will include significant and representative examples. In its report, the panel gives an account of the manner in which it has organised its visit and how it has arrived at its choice of discussion partners and documents.

The assessment report is preceded by a summary judgement regarding the quality of the programme, comprising a maximum of two pages. Any measures for improvement will be presented in a separate paragraph. In addition, the report contains a score table with the panel judgements, information on the date(s) of the site visit, the names of the discussion partners, basic data concerning the programme (see paragraph 4.6), an overview of the material studied and the declarations of independence signed by the panel members and the secretary.

The assessment panel secretary forwards the advisory report to the board of the institution once all panel members have approved its contents. The institution is given the opportunity to respond to any factual inaccuracies in the report, whereupon the panel chair endorses the report after all panel members have taken note of and approved its contents. The report is signed by the chair and the secretary of the panel.

4.5 **NVAO decision-making**

The board of the institution applies to NVAO for accreditation based on the assessment report. NVAO may decide to accredit the programme, not accredit it or grant an improvement period. The Accreditation Decree of the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act stipulates how, on what grounds and under what circumstances NVAO may grant an improvement period.

4.6 Required documents

During the assessment process, the programme provides the assessment panel with a limited number of documents. NVAO assumes that these are existing documents, available within the institution, rather than documents prepared especially for the programme assessment. The documents serve as a substantiation and if need be as verification. Other material is only required when explicitly requested by the panel or if the programme wishes to demonstrate a particular distinctive feature.

4.6.1 *Basic data concerning the programme*

(The basic data is incorporated into the critical reflection, the assessment report and the NVAO decision.)

Administrative data regarding the programme

1. Nomenclature of the programme in CROHO [central register of higher education programmes];
2. Orientation and level of the programme;
3. Number of credits;
4. Specialisations;
5. Location(s);
6. Mode (s) of study;
7. CROHO registration number.

Administrative data regarding the institution

1. Name of the institution;
2. Status of the institution (publicly funded or legal body providing higher education);

Quantitative data regarding the programme

1. Data on intake, transfers and graduates pertaining to – if possible – the last six cohorts;
2. Teacher -student ratio achieved;
3. Average amount of face-to-face instruction per stage of the study programme (a stage can be expressed in, for example, regular years of study, the work placement and the graduation period).

4.6.2 *Required appendices to the critical reflection*

(The list of appendices studied will be incorporated into the assessment report.)

1. Subject-specific reference framework and the learning outcomes of the programme;
2. Overview of the curriculum in diagram form;
3. Outline description of the curriculum components, stating learning outcomes, attainment targets, teaching method(s), assessment method, literature (mandatory/recommended), teacher and credits;
4. Teaching and examination regulations;
(Items 2 to 4 are usually reflected in a study guide, in which case this can be annexed to the report.)
5. Overview of allocated staff with names, positions, scope of appointment, level and expertise;
6. List of the last 25 final projects or the final projects of the past two years (or portfolios / projects demonstrating the exit levels attained by the students);

7. Overview of the contacts maintained with the professional field (if relevant).

4.6.3 *Documents made available during the visit*

(The list of material studied will be incorporated into the assessment report.)

1. Education policy plan or similar document(s);
2. Policy plan regarding research in relation to the programmes offered or similar document(s);
3. Staff (policy) plan or similar document(s);
4. Services and facilities plan or similar document(s);
5. Quality assurance plan;
6. Policy plan regarding the accessibility and feasibility of the programme for students with a functional disability;
7. Summary and analysis of recent evaluation results and relevant management information;
8. Documentation regarding student and staff satisfaction;
9. Reports on consultations in relevant committees / bodies;
10. Test questions with corresponding assessment criteria and requirements (answer models) and a representative selection of actual tests administered (such as presentations, work placements, portfolio assessments) and assessments;
11. Representative selection of final projects, selected by the panel, of the past two years with corresponding assessment criteria and requirements;
12. Reference books and other learning materials.

5 Limited initial accreditation

5.1 Set-up

The framework for limited assessments of new programmes is used for institutions that have obtained a positive judgement following an institutional quality assurance assessment. The assessment is based on a discussion with peers regarding the content and quality of the programme. It focuses on four questions:

1. What is the programme aiming for?
2. How does the programme intend to achieve its objectives?
3. How does the programme intend to assess its performance?
4. Does the programme have sufficient financial resources?

These four questions have been translated into four standards. Regarding each of these standards, an assessment panel gives a substantiated judgement on a two-point scale: unsatisfactory or satisfactory. The panel subsequently gives a substantiated final conclusion regarding the quality of the programme, on the same two-point scale.

5.2 Assessment framework for limited initial accreditations

Intended learning outcomes

Standard 1: *The intended learning outcomes of the programme have been concretised with regard to content, level and orientation; they meet international requirements.*

Explanation: As for level and orientation (bachelor's or master's; professional or academic), the intended learning outcomes fit into the Dutch qualifications framework. In addition, they tie in with the international perspective of the requirements currently set by the professional field and the discipline with regard to the contents of the programme.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory (weighted and substantiated).

Teaching-learning environment

Standard 2: *The curriculum, staff and programme-specific services and facilities enable incoming students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.*

Explanation: The contents and structure of the curriculum enable the students admitted to achieve the intended learning outcomes. The quality of the staff and of the programme-specific services and facilities is essential to that end. Curriculum, staff, services and facilities constitute a coherent teaching-learning environment for the students.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory (weighted and substantiated).

Assessment

Standard 3: *The programme has an adequate assessment system in place.*

Explanation: The level achieved is demonstrated by interim and final tests. The tests and assessments are valid, reliable and transparent to the students.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory (weighted and substantiated).

Graduation guarantee and financial provisions

Standard 4: *The institution guarantees students that they can complete the entire curriculum and makes sufficient financial provisions available.*

Explanation: The graduation guarantee spans a reasonable period of time that is related to the length of the studies.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory (weighted and substantiated).

General conclusion

The quality of the programme is

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory (weighted and substantiated).

The assessment is based on the following definitions. These definitions relate to both the scores obtained for the individual standards and the overall scores awarded to the programme.

Generic quality

The quality that can reasonably be expected in an international perspective from a higher education bachelor's or master's programme.

Unsatisfactory

The programme does not satisfy the generic quality standards.

Satisfactory

The programme satisfies the generic quality standards.

For programmes that are not entirely new and programmes that are being converted, the learning outcomes achieved will be factored into the judgement.

5.3 Composition of the assessment panel¹⁶

NVAO convenes and appoints the assessment panel that will conduct the initial accreditation. The programme to be assessed is entitled to lodge substantiated objections to the composition of the assessment panel.

It is imperative that assessment panels are composed in a manner allowing meaningful discussions among peers, in which the panel remains sufficiently independent.

The panel secretary has completed NVAO training leading to certification. Every year, NVAO publishes a list of NVAO certified secretaries.

Assessment panels must meet the following requirements.

1. The panel is composed of a minimum of four members, among whom at least two authoritative domain experts¹⁷ and a student.
2. Overall, the panel commands the following expertise:
 - a. expertise regarding developments in the discipline,
 - b. international expertise,
 - c. practical expertise in the professional field relevant to the programme (if applicable),

¹⁶ This paragraph is explained in detail in the guideline titled *Eisen aan de panelsamenstelling* [Requirements for the composition of panels]. This guideline contains detailed requirements to be met by panels. It also contains a submission procedure, a form to be filled out by the institution and a code of conduct for panel members.

¹⁷ Domain expertise is understood to mean specialist expertise, international expertise or professional expertise.

- d. experience in teaching and educational development at the relevant programme level and expertise regarding the teaching format(s) used in the programme¹⁸,
 - e. student-related expertise,
 - f. assessment or audit expertise.
3. The panel is independent (its members have not had any ties with the institution providing the programme for at least the past five years).
 4. The panel is assisted by an independent, external secretary trained and certified by NVAO. The secretary does not sit on the panel.

The assessment panel is counselled by an NVAO process co-ordinator and supported by a secretary. The secretary and the process co-ordinator are also independent of the institution in question. The secretary and the process co-ordinator do not sit on the panel.

Prior to the visit, all panel members and the secretary certify to not maintaining any connections or ties with the institution in question, either as a private individual or as a researcher / teacher, professional or adviser, which could affect an independent judgement of the quality of the programme in either a positive or a negative sense, and to not having had such connections or ties with the institution during the past five years. In addition to the factual independence, as expressed above in the nature of the relation and the number of years, it is essential for any panel member or secretary to feel independent. In some cases, an independence of more than five years may not provide sufficient guarantee for an independent position; a prospective panel member or secretary could still experience too strong a relationship with the institution or be involved too closely with an institution or programme, for example because of family ties. In such cases, the prospective panel member or secretary cannot sit on the panel. Panel membership requires a professional attitude. To that end, NVAO has formulated a code of conduct for panel members and secretaries. This code of conduct comprises elements pertaining to the independence, confidentiality and attitude of the panel members and the secretary during the assessment process.

Panel members and secretaries will sign a declaration of independence and confidentiality prior to the assessment process. In this declaration, they attest to having taken note of the code of conduct. Following the assessment process, the chair and secretary sign the assessment report once all panel members have read and approved the report. The report includes a declaration that the assessment has been carried out independently.

Stakeholders such as panel members, staff or students may report to NVAO any matters arising during the assessment process that could affect the independence of the assessment.

¹⁸ This includes, for example, distance learning, work-related courses, flexible education, skill-oriented education or education aimed at excellent students.

5.4 Assessment process

5.4.1 *Information dossier*

For the purpose of the assessment by the assessment panel, the programme presents an information dossier regarding the programme. The information dossier should follow the standards outlined for the limited initial accreditation framework. It positions the programme in relation to existing (and new) programmes at home and abroad. The critical reflection is a self-contained document that can be read separately.

The framework for limited initial accreditations is structured in a manner allowing programmes ample scope to emphasise their unique character. The programme may use that scope in its information dossier. The information dossier is the pre-eminent tool to allow teachers and peers to comment on the contents of the programme. It must be a document reflecting the commitment of the stakeholders.

It is imperative that any overlap with assessments within the context of the institutional quality assurance assessment is avoided when drawing up the information dossier and during the assessment procedure. Should any reference to institutional policy or, for example, departmental policy be necessary, programme assessments strictly focus on the fitness for purpose of the policy pursued regarding the programme in question. This does not include pre-conditional matters, such as the structure of quality assurance or the institution's staff policy; these are considered in institutional quality assurance assessments.

The information dossier comprises a maximum of 20 pages, excluding appendices.

5.4.2 *Site visit*

In principle, the required site visit for the purpose of limited initial accreditations takes one day. Prior to the visit, the panel members will have formed a preliminary opinion about the programme and drawn up questions for their site visit. The panel factors the outcomes of the institutional quality assurance assessment into its judgement.

During the site visit, the assessment panel meets with the (prospective) programme management, the (prospective) members of the examining board and the programme committee, (prospective) teachers and, wherever relevant, representatives of the professional field. In addition, the panel examines the material made available by the programme. The panel determines the exact scope of the discussions, the possible clustering of discussion participants and the further organisation of the visit. The panel decides at its own discretion which teachers and students it would like to see and which documents it would like to examine. In principle, the programme delegations comprise no more than six persons.

At the end of the site visit, the chair of the assessment panel provides brief feedback information to the programme regarding the general judgement and the underlying considerations.

5.4.3 *Assessment procedure within the assessment panel*

The assessment panel presents its judgement regarding all the standards incorporated in the assessment framework. This judgement is substantiated by an appraisal of the positive and critical elements from the panel's findings. The judgement may be: unsatisfactory or satisfactory. The panel subsequently formulates a general, weighted and substantiated

judgement regarding the quality of the programme. This judgement is given on the same two-point scale (unsatisfactory or satisfactory).

5.4.4 *Advisory report*

The assessment panel secretary draws up an advisory report comprising some 20 pages. The main content of the report is made up of the panel's judgements regarding the standards, including underpinnings based on the programme's information dossier, the meetings with representatives of the programme and the underlying data from the documents studied. The report will include significant and representative examples. In the report, the panel gives an account of the manner in which it has organised its visit and how it has arrived at its choice of discussion partners and documents.

The assessment report is preceded by a summary judgement regarding the quality of the programme comprising a maximum of two pages. Any measures for improvement will be presented in a separate paragraph. In addition, the report contains a score table with the panel judgements, information on the date(s) of the site visit, the names of the discussion partners, basic data concerning the programme (see paragraph 5.6), an overview of the material studied and the declarations of independence signed by the panel members and the secretary.

NVAO forwards the advisory report to the board of the institution once all panel members have approved its contents. The institution is given a term of two weeks to respond to any factual inaccuracies in the report, whereupon the panel chair endorses the report after all panel members have taken note of and approved its contents. The report is signed by the chair and the secretary of the panel and submitted to NVAO for decision-making. If NVAO finds that a report raises questions or if an institution so desires, NVAO may invite the programme and/or the assessment panel for further consultations.

5.5 **NVAO decision-making**

Basically, NVAO can take two decisions: a positive initial accreditation decision for a period of six years, or a negative initial accreditation decision.

In special cases, NVAO may attach conditions to its decision. In that case, the programme must apply for additional assessment within a year, whereupon NVAO ascertains whether the programme meanwhile meets the conditions set. If the programme fails to apply for an additional assessment or does not meet the conditions, the positive decision expires. Satisfaction of the conditions set will be assessed by an assessment panel commissioned by NVAO. The additional assessment will basically be carried out in accordance with the procedure for regular limited initial accreditations. The assessment panel will focus on the programme's shortcomings identified earlier.

5.6 **Required documents**

During the assessment process, the programme provides the assessment panel with a limited number of documents. NVAO assumes that these are existing documents, available within the programme or the institution, rather than documents prepared especially for the programme assessment. The documents serve as a substantiation and if need be as

verification. Other material is only required when explicitly requested by the panel or if the programme wishes to demonstrate a particular distinctive feature.

5.6.1 Basic data concerning the programme

(The basic data is incorporated into the information dossier, the advisory report and the NVAO decision.)

Administrative data regarding the programme

1. Nomenclature of the programme;
2. Orientation and level of the programme;
3. Number of credits;
4. Specialisations;
5. Location(s);
6. Mode (s) of study;

Administrative data regarding the institution

1. Name of the institution;
2. Status of the institution (publicly funded or legal body providing higher education);
3. Outcome of the institutional quality assurance assessment.

Quantitative data regarding the programme

1. Intended teacher-student ratio;
2. Intended amount of face-to-face instruction per stage of the study programme (a stage can be expressed in, for example, regular years of study, the work placement and the graduation period).

5.6.2 Required appendices to the information dossier

(The list of appendices studied will be incorporated into the advisory report.)

1. Subject-specific reference framework and the learning outcomes of the programme;
2. Overview of the curriculum in diagram form;
3. Outline description of the curriculum components for the first year, stating learning outcomes, attainment targets, teaching method(s), assessment method, literature (mandatory/recommended), teacher and credits;
4. Teaching and examination regulations;
5. Overview of allocated staff with names, positions, scope of appointment, level and expertise;
6. If so required, the macro-efficiency decision;
7. Overview of the contacts maintained with the professional field (if relevant);
8. Report on the institutional quality assurance assessment.

5.6.3 Documents made available during the visit

(The list of material studied will be incorporated into the advisory report.)

1. Reports on consultations in relevant committees / bodies;
2. Reference books and other learning materials.

6 Extensive initial accreditation

6.1 Set-up

The framework for extensive assessments of new programmes (extensive initial accreditation framework) is used for institutions that have failed to obtain a positive judgement following an institutional quality assurance assessment. The assessment is based on a discussion with peers regarding the content and quality of the programme. It focuses on seven questions:

1. What is the programme aiming for?
2. With what curriculum?
3. With what staff?
4. With what services and facilities?
5. How does the programme intend to safeguard quality?
6. How does the programme intend to assess its performance?
7. Does the programme have sufficient financial resources?

These seven questions have been translated into seven themes and 16 standards. Regarding each of these standards, an assessment panel gives a substantiated judgement on a two-point scale: unsatisfactory or satisfactory. The panel subsequently gives a substantiated final conclusion regarding the overall quality of the programme, on the same two-point scale.

6.2 Assessment framework for extensive initial accreditations

Intended learning outcomes

Standard 1: *The intended learning outcomes of the programme have been concretised with regard to content, level and orientation; they meet international requirements.*

Explanation: As for level and orientation (bachelor's or master's; professional or academic), the intended learning outcomes fit into the Dutch qualifications framework. In addition, they tie in with the international perspective of the requirements currently set by the professional field and the discipline with regard to the contents of the programme.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory (weighted and substantiated).

Curriculum

Standard 2: *The orientation of the curriculum assures the development of skills in the field of scientific research and/or the professional practice.*

Explanation: The curriculum has demonstrable links with current developments in the professional field and the discipline.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 3: *The contents of the curriculum enable students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.*

Explanation: The learning outcomes have been adequately translated into attainment targets for (components of) the curriculum. Students follow a study curriculum which is coherent in terms of content.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 4: *The structure of the curriculum encourages study and enables students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.*

Explanation: The teaching concept is in line with the intended learning outcomes and the teaching formats tie in with the teaching concept.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 5: *The curriculum ties in with the qualifications of the incoming students.*

Explanation: The admission requirements are realistic with a view to the intended learning outcomes.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 6: *The curriculum is feasible.*

Explanation: Factors pertaining to the curriculum and hindering students' progress are removed as far as possible. In addition, students with functional disabilities receive additional career tutoring.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 7: *The programme meets statutory requirements regarding the scope and duration of the curriculum.*

Explanation: Scope and duration:

- Bachelor's programmes (professional orientation): 240 credits;
- Bachelor's programmes (academic orientation): in principle, a minimum of 180 credits;
- Master's programmes (professional orientation): in principle, a minimum of 60 credits;
- Master's programmes (academic orientation): in principle, a minimum of 60 credits, depending on the programme.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory (weighted and substantiated).

Staff

Standard 8: *The programme has an effective staff policy in place.*

Explanation: The staff policy provides for the qualifications, training, assessment and size of the staff required for the realisation of the curriculum.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 9: *The staff is qualified for the realisation of the curriculum in terms of content, educational expertise and organisation.*

Explanation: The factual expertise available among the staff ties in with the requirements set for professional or academic higher education programmes.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 10: *The size of the staff is sufficient for the realisation of the curriculum.*

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory (weighted and substantiated).

Services and facilities

Standard 11: *The accommodation and the facilities (infrastructure) are sufficient for the realisation of the curriculum.*

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 12: *Tutoring and student information provision bolster students' progress and tie in with the needs of students.*

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory (weighted and substantiated).

Quality assurance

Standard 13: *The programme is evaluated on a regular basis, partly on the basis of assessable targets.*

Explanation: The programme ensures the quality of the intended learning outcomes, the curriculum, the staff, the services and facilities, the assessments and the learning outcomes achieved through regular evaluations. The programme also collects management information regarding the success rates and the staff-student ratio.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 14: *Programme committees, examining boards, staff, students, alumni and the relevant professional field of the programme are actively involved in the programme's internal quality assurance.*

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory (weighted and substantiated).

Assessment

Standard 15: *The programme has an adequate assessment system in place.*

Explanation: The level achieved is demonstrated by interim and final tests. The tests and assessments are valid, reliable and transparent to the students.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory (weighted and substantiated).

Graduation guarantee and financial provisions

Standard 16: *The institution guarantees students that they can complete the entire curriculum and makes sufficient financial provisions available.*

Explanation: The graduation guarantee spans a reasonable period of time that is related to the length of the studies.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory (weighted and substantiated).

General conclusion

The quality of the programme is

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory (weighted and substantiated).

The assessment is based on the following definitions. These definitions relate to both the scores obtained for the individual standards and the overall scores awarded to the programme.

Generic quality

The quality that can reasonably be expected in an international perspective from a higher education bachelor's or master's programme.

Unsatisfactory

The programme does not satisfy the generic quality standards.

Satisfactory

The programme satisfies the generic quality standards.

For programmes that are not entirely new and programmes that are being converted, the learning outcomes achieved will be factored into the judgement.

6.3 Composition of the assessment panel¹⁹

NVAO convenes and appoints the assessment panel that will conduct the initial accreditation. The programme to be assessed is entitled to lodge substantiated objections to the composition of the assessment panel.

It is imperative that assessment panels are composed in a manner allowing meaningful discussions among peers, in which the panel remains sufficiently independent.

The panel secretary has completed NVAO training leading to certification. Every year, NVAO publishes a list of NVAO certified secretaries.

Assessment panels must meet the following requirements.

1. The panel is composed of a minimum of four members, among whom at least two authoritative domain experts²⁰ and a student.
2. Overall, the panel commands the following expertise:
 - a. expertise regarding developments in the discipline,
 - b. international expertise,
 - c. practical expertise in the professional field relevant to the programme (if applicable),
 - d. experience in teaching and educational development at the relevant programme level and expertise regarding the teaching format(s) used in the programme²¹,
 - e. student-related expertise,
 - f. assessment or audit expertise.

¹⁹ This paragraph is explained in detail in the guideline titled *Eisen aan de panelsamenstelling* [Requirements for the composition of panels]. This guideline contains detailed requirements to be met by panels. It also contains a submission procedure, a form to be filled out by the institution and a code of conduct for panel members.

²⁰ Domain expertise is understood to mean specialist expertise, international expertise or professional expertise.

²¹ This includes, for example, distance learning, work-related courses, flexible education, skill-oriented education or education aimed at excellent students.

3. The panel is independent (its members have not had any ties with the institution providing the programme for at least the past five years).
4. The panel is assisted by an independent, external secretary trained and certified by NVAO. The secretary does not sit on the panel.

The assessment panel is counselled by an NVAO process co-ordinator and supported by a secretary. The secretary and the process co-ordinator are also independent of the institution in question. The secretary and the process co-ordinator do not sit on the panel.

Prior to the visit, all panel members and the secretary certify to not maintaining any connections or ties with the institution in question, either as a private individual or as a researcher / teacher, professional or adviser, which could affect an independent judgement of the quality of the programme in either a positive or a negative sense, and to not having had such connections or ties with the institution during the past five years.

In addition to the factual independence, as expressed above in the nature of the relation and the number of years, it is essential for any panel member or secretary to feel independent. In some cases, an independence of more than five years may not provide sufficient guarantee for an independent position; a prospective panel member or secretary could still experience too strong a relationship with the institution or be involved too closely with an institution or programme, for example because of family ties. In such cases, the prospective panel member or secretary cannot sit on the panel. Panel membership requires a professional attitude. To that end, NVAO has formulated a code of conduct for panel members and secretaries. This code of conduct comprises elements pertaining to the independence, confidentiality and attitude of the panel members and the secretary during the assessment process.

Panel members and secretaries will sign a declaration of independence and confidentiality prior to the assessment process. In this declaration, they attest to having taken note of the code of conduct. Following the assessment process, the chair and secretary sign the assessment report once all panel members have read and approved the report. The report includes a declaration that the assessment has been carried out independently.

Stakeholders such as panel members, staff or students may report to NVAO any matters arising during the assessment process that could affect the independence of the assessment.

6.4 Assessment process

6.4.1 Information dossier

For the purpose of the assessment by the assessment panel, the programme presents an information dossier regarding the programme. The information dossier should follow the standards outlined for the extensive initial accreditation framework. It positions the programme in relation to existing (and new) programmes at home and abroad. The critical reflection is a self-contained document that can be read separately.

The information dossier is the pre-eminent tool to allow teachers and peers to comment on the contents of the programme. It must be a document reflecting the commitment of the stakeholders.

In addition, the assessment framework offers opportunities to discuss the ambitions of the programme during the site visit. What choices will the programme make for the future, what direction will it take? In order to conduct such discussions, the assessment panel is expected to be able to reflect on the programme's plans for the future, together with the programme's representatives.

The information dossier comprises a maximum of 35 pages, excluding appendices.

6.4.2 *Site visit*

In principle, the required site visit for the purpose of extensive initial accreditations takes one day. Prior to the visit, the panel members will have formed a preliminary opinion about the programme and drawn up questions for their site visit.

During the site visit, the assessment panel meets with the (prospective) programme management, the (prospective) members of the examining board and the programme committee, (prospective) teachers and, wherever relevant, representatives of the professional field. In addition, the panel examines the material made available by the programme. The panel determines the exact scope of the discussions, the possible clustering of discussion participants and the further organisation of the visit. The panel decides at its own discretion which teachers and students it would like to see and which documents it would like to examine. In principle, the programme delegations comprise no more than six persons.

At the end of the site visit, the chair of the assessment panel provides brief feedback information to the programme regarding the general judgement and the underlying considerations.

6.4.3 *Assessment procedure within the assessment panel*

The assessment panel presents its judgement regarding all the standards incorporated in the assessment framework. This judgement is substantiated by an appraisal of the positive and critical elements from the panel's findings. The judgement may be: unsatisfactory or satisfactory. The panel subsequently formulates a general, weighted and substantiated judgement regarding the quality of the programme. This judgement is given on the same two-point scale (unsatisfactory or satisfactory).

6.4.4 *Advisory report*

The assessment panel secretary draws up an advisory report comprising 20 to 30 pages. The main content of the report is made up of the panel's judgements regarding the standards, including underpinnings based on the programme's information dossier, the meetings with representatives of the programme and the underlying data from the documents studied. The report will include significant and representative examples. In the report, the panel gives an account of the manner in which it has organised its visit and how it has arrived at its choice of discussion partners and documents.

The assessment report is preceded by a summary judgement regarding the quality of the programme comprising a maximum of two pages. Any measures for improvement will be presented in a separate paragraph. In addition, the report contains a score table with the panel judgements, information on the date(s) of the site visit, the names of the discussion partners, basic data concerning the programme (see paragraph 6.6), an overview of the

material studied and the declarations of independence signed by the panel members and the secretary.

NVAO forwards the advisory report to the board of the institution once all panel members have approved its contents. The institution is given a term of two weeks to respond to any factual inaccuracies in the report, whereupon the panel chair endorses the report after all panel members have taken note of and approved its contents. The report is signed by the chair and the secretary of the panel and submitted to NVAO for decision-making. If NVAO finds that a report raises questions or if an institution so desires, NVAO may invite the programme and/or the assessment panel for further consultations.

6.5 NVAO decision-making

Basically, NVAO can take two decisions: a positive initial accreditation decision for a period of six years, or a negative initial accreditation decision.

In special cases, NVAO may attach conditions to its decision. In that case, the programme must apply for additional assessment within a year, whereupon NVAO ascertains whether the programme meanwhile meets the conditions set. If the programme fails to apply for an additional assessment or does not meet the conditions, the positive decision expires. Satisfaction of the conditions set will be assessed by an assessment panel commissioned by NVAO. The additional assessment will basically be carried out in accordance with the procedure for regular limited initial accreditations. The assessment panel will focus on the programme's shortcomings identified earlier.

6.6 Required documents

During the assessment process, the programme provides the assessment panel with a limited number of documents. NVAO assumes that these are existing documents, available within the programme or the institution, rather than documents prepared especially for the programme assessment. The documents serve as a substantiation and if need be as verification. Other material is only required when explicitly requested by the panel or if the programme wishes to demonstrate a particular distinctive feature.

6.6.1 *Basic data concerning the programme*

(The basic data is incorporated into the information dossier, the advisory report and the NVAO decision.)

Administrative data regarding the programme

1. Nomenclature of the programme;
2. Orientation and level of the programme;
3. Number of credits;
4. Specialisations;
5. Location(s);
6. Mode (s) of study;

Administrative data regarding the institution

1. Name of the institution;
2. Status of the institution (publicly funded or legal body providing higher education).

Quantitative data regarding the programme

1. Intended teacher-student ratio;
2. Intended amount of face-to-face instruction per stage of the study programme (a stage can be expressed in, for example, regular years of study, the work placement and the graduation period).

6.6.2 *Required appendices to the information dossier*

(The list of appendices studied will be incorporated into the advisory report.)

1. Subject-specific reference framework and the learning outcomes of the programme;
2. Overview of the curriculum in diagram form;
3. Outline description of the curriculum components for the first year, stating learning outcomes, attainment targets, teaching method(s), assessment method, literature (mandatory/recommended), teacher and credits;
4. Teaching and examination regulations;
5. Overview of allocated staff with names, positions, scope of appointment, level and expertise;
6. If so required, the macro-efficiency decision;
7. Overview of the contacts maintained with the professional field (if relevant).

6.6.3 *Documents to be made available during the visit*

(The list of documents studied will be incorporated into the advisory report.)

1. Education policy plan or similar document(s);
2. Policy plan regarding research in relation to the programmes offered or similar document(s);
3. Staff (policy) plan or similar document(s);
4. Services and facilities plan or similar document(s);
5. Policy plan regarding the accessibility and feasibility for students with a functional disability;
6. Quality assurance plan;
7. Reports on consultations in relevant committees / bodies;
8. Reference books and other learning materials.

7 Distinctive features

7.1 Background

The distinctive features have been incorporated into the accreditation system because they can contribute to the national and international profiling of higher education programmes. A distinctive feature enables institutions to draw attention to aspects that are not directly related to programme levels but involve, for example, the orientation of a programme (such as research master's programmes), objectives such as sustainability or the residential nature.

Distinctive features are assessed on the basis of the following principles:

1. The audit panel or assessment panel assesses a distinctive feature by reference to the relevant framework in combination with the criteria set out below. The panel ascertains whether the institution or programme profiling the distinctive feature fulfils its promise.
2. To that end, the panel determines, in consultation with the institution or programme, what standards it will focus on during the assessment.
3. The required comparison with other relevant institutions or programmes is performed by the institution or programme itself.
4. The composition of the assessing panel is geared to the assessment of the distinctive feature.
5. The point of departure is that an institution or programme may apply for assessment of a distinctive feature at any time. However, its accreditation period may not exceed the final date of the original application.
6. A distinctive feature must meet the following criteria.
- 7.

7.2 Criteria for distinctive features

Distinguishing nature

Criterion 1: *The distinctive feature distinguishes the institution or programme from other relevant institutions or programmes in the Dutch higher education sector.*

Explanation: The institution or programme demonstrates that the distinctive feature has a distinguishing but not necessarily unique nature *vis-à-vis* relevant institutions or programmes in the Dutch higher education sector.

Judgement: Meets, does not meet or partially meets the standard (weighted and substantiated).

Concretisation

Criterion 2: *The impact of the distinctive feature on the quality of the education provided has been operationalised on the basis of the relevant standards in the appropriate assessment framework.*

Explanation: The assessing panel indicates which standard(s) it regards as relevant to the realisation of the feature and why. The judgement must demonstrate the operationalisation of the distinctive feature for the relevant standard(s). If a distinctive feature spans several standards in the framework in question, the judgement should provide a concrete and complete assessment of the feature for all standards concerned.

Judgement: Meets, does not meet or partially meets the standard (weighted and substantiated).

General conclusion

The distinctive feature is

Judgement: Granted, not granted (weighted and substantiated).

8 Assessment scales for programme assessments

Each judgement is illustrated with a number of examples to assist in its operationalisation.

Examples that apply exclusively to extensive programme assessments are marked "EPA".

8.1 Unsatisfactory

The programme does not meet the current generic quality standards and shows serious shortcomings in several areas.

This judgement could be operationalised as follows:

- The level and/or orientation of the learning outcomes do not fit within the (inter)national qualification frameworks and have not been concretised into subject- or programme-specific performance levels.
- The aggregate of curriculum, staff, services and facilities does not constitute an environment conducive to learning.
- The programme lacks a programme-wide, transparent and coherent assessment policy.
- The intended learning outcomes are not being achieved.
- Quality assurance in the programme is not pursued in a systematic manner, which translates into a lack of improvement policy (EPA).

8.2 Satisfactory

The programme meets the current generic quality standards and demonstrates an acceptable level across its entire spectrum.

This judgement could be operationalised as follows:

- The level and/or orientation of the learning outcomes fit within the (inter)national qualification frameworks and have been concretised into subject- or programme-specific performance levels.
- The aggregate of curriculum, staff, services and facilities constitutes an environment conducive to learning which enables students to achieve the learning outcomes.
- The programme has developed a programme-wide, transparent and coherent assessment policy, which, however, is not yet pursued by all parties involved.
- The intended learning outcomes are achieved.
- Quality assurance in the programme is pursued in a systematic manner, which translates into a consistent improvement policy (EPA).

8.3 Good

The programme systematically surpasses the current generic quality standard across its entire spectrum.

This judgement could be operationalised as follows:

- The level and/or orientation of the learning outcomes fit within the (inter)national qualification frameworks and have been concretised into subject- or programme-specific performance levels. These are given a specific interpretation based on the programme's explicit views.
- The aggregate of curriculum, staff, services and facilities constitutes a challenging learning environment.
- The programme has developed a programme-wide, transparent and coherent assessment policy, which is pursued by all parties involved.
- The learning outcomes achieved translate into products that are systematically above average.
- Quality assurance in the programme is pursued in a systematic manner, which translates into a consistent improvement policy that is reflected in a growing quality culture (EPA).

8.4 Excellent

The programme systematically well surpasses the current generic quality standards across its entire spectrum and is regarded as an (inter)national example.

This judgement could be operationalised as follows:

- The level and/or orientation of the learning outcomes fit within the (inter)national qualification frameworks and have been concretised into subject- or programme-specific performance levels. These are given a specific interpretation based on the programme's explicit and unique views. The programme serves as an example both nationally and internationally.
- The aggregate of curriculum, staff, services and facilities constitutes an innovative, original learning environment.
- The learning outcomes achieved are of excellent quality and translate into awards and (inter)national publications.
- Quality assurance in the programme is pursued in a systematic manner, which translates into a consistent improvement policy and a strong ability for self-reflection. This is reflected in a robust quality culture (EPA).

9 Assessment rules

9.1 Programme assessments

For programmes offering various modes of study (for example, full-time, part-time and work-based learning), the assessment must demonstrate that the generic quality of each mode of study is assured, based on the standards in the relevant assessment framework, in order to arrive at a positive final conclusion regarding the programme.

Programmes that are offered at various locations under a single CROHO registration only qualify for accreditation if the assessment shows that each location meets the generic quality standards stated in the relevant framework.

Limited programme assessments

- The final conclusion regarding a programme will always be “unsatisfactory” if standard 3 is judged “unsatisfactory”. In case of an unsatisfactory score on standard 1, NVAO cannot grant an improvement period.
- The final conclusion regarding a programme can only be “good” if at least two standards are judged “good”; one of these must be standard 3.
- The final conclusion regarding a programme can only be “excellent” if at least two standards are judged “excellent”; one of these must be standard 3.

Extensive programme assessments

- The final conclusion regarding a programme will always be “unsatisfactory” if standard 1 or standard 16 is judged “unsatisfactory”. In case of an unsatisfactory score on standard 1, NVAO cannot grant an improvement period.
- The final conclusion regarding a programme can only be “good” if at least standards 1, 3, 6, 9, 13, 14, 15 and 16 are judged “good”.
- The final conclusion regarding a programme can only be “excellent” if standards 1, 3, 6, 9, 13, 14, 15 and 16 are judged “excellent”.

Limited initial accreditations

The final conclusion regarding a programme will always be “unsatisfactory” if standards 1 or 3 are judged “unsatisfactory”. In case of an unsatisfactory score on standards 1 or 3, NVAO cannot grant a conditional initial accreditation.

Extensive initial accreditations

The final conclusion regarding a programme will always be “unsatisfactory” if standards 1 or 15 are judged “unsatisfactory”. In case of an unsatisfactory score on standards 1 or 15, NVAO cannot grant a conditional initial accreditation.

9.2 Institutional quality assurance assessments

The final conclusion following institutional quality assurance assessments will always be “negative” if standards 1 or 4 are judged “does not meet the standard”. In case of an unsatisfactory score on standards 1 or 4, NVAO cannot grant a conditional pass on the institutional quality assurance assessment.

10 Accreditation Decision under the Higher Education and Research Act

In this chapter, NVAO outlines the rules laid down by implementing regulations [Dutch: AMVB] regarding conditional decisions and the granting of improvement periods. The Dutch Higher Education and Research Act [WHW] stipulates that implementing regulations be formulated to specify the conditions under which and the situations in which improvement periods may be granted in the accreditation of programmes (Article 5a.12a, first paragraph), the conditional initial accreditation of programmes (Article 5a.11, fourth paragraph) and conditional institutional quality assurance assessments (Article 5a.13d, sixth paragraph). In this document, this implementing regulation is referred to as: Accreditation Decision under the Higher Education and Research Act.

10.1 Conditional initial accreditation and institutional quality assurance assessment

NVAO may attach conditions to an initial accreditation or institutional quality assurance assessment if, on the basis of the advice submitted by the panel of experts, it arrives at the conclusion that certain quality aspects are unsatisfactory but can reasonably be remedied within a timeframe of one year.

With regard to initial accreditations, this pertains to both extensive and limited assessments (Article 5a.10a, second paragraph, and Article 5a.13g, first paragraph). In a conditional initial accreditation of institutional quality assurance assessment, the conditions in question relate to the efforts expected from the board of the institution to improve the quality aspects that are assessed as unsatisfactory as well as the manner in which these efforts must be expended, the manner in which and the timeframe within which the board of the institution must ultimately report on these efforts to NVAO and the communication by the board of the institution to the students and other stakeholders regarding the conditions set.

The timeframe to be observed for reporting must logically follow the timeframe allowed to implement the improvements. A timeframe shorter than one year may be set if, in the opinion of NVAO, the improvements may be realised sooner. Communication is important because students must be informed to the full when selecting a study programme. This information is also relevant to others, such as employers with whom the institution maintains a special relationship and who employ many graduates.

An initial accreditation application must be denied if the standards of 'Intended learning outcomes' or 'Testing' are judged unsatisfactory. An application for an institutional quality assurance assessment must be denied if the standards of 'View of the quality of the education provided' or 'Improvement policy' are judged unsatisfactory. In those cases, a conditional initial accreditation or institutional quality assurance assessment cannot be granted.

10.2 Improvement period for accreditation

If NVAO assesses an application for the renewal of an existing accreditation or accreditation following an initial accreditation decision and determines that the programme does not meet all the required quality aspects, it may decide to renew the existing accreditation or initial accreditation and grant a so-called 'improvement period'. This pertains to both extensive

and limited accreditation assessments (Article 5a.8, second paragraph and Article 5a.13f, first paragraph).

An improvement period may only be granted if, in the opinion of NVAO, the deficiencies may reasonably be remedied within a timeframe of no more than two years.

The assessment report submitted by the assessment panel is essential in this respect. However, if the standard of 'Intended learning outcomes' is judged unsatisfactory, an improvement period cannot be granted and the application for accreditation must be denied. This is because a programme's ambitions level must be at least up to par. Generic quality is not guaranteed in programmes whose intended exit level is sub-standard; thus, they lack a critical quality culture and vision, the basis for good-quality higher education of world-class standards. In such cases, granting an improvement period is uncalled for.

NVAO may set conditions when granting an improvement period. In terms of content and function, these conditions correspond to the conditions that may be attached to initial accreditations and institutional quality assurance assessments. The difference from conditional initial accreditations and institutional quality assurance assessments, however, is that the board of the institution is required to submit a new application to NVAO no later than six months before the end of the improvement period, viz. an application for a decision to determine whether the programme meets the accreditation framework as yet (Article 5a.12a, fourth and fifth paragraphs of the Act).

Similar to the points for improvement in initial accreditations, an improvement period may be shorter than two years if, in the opinion of NVAO, improvement may be achieved within a shorter space of time. The above timeframe for submitting applications is, however, based on the assumption that extensions of the validity by a period of less than one year would be improbable. In addition, an unsatisfactory score on the 'Testing and learning outcomes achieved' standard warrants a maximum improvement period of one year, i.e., any improvements on this standard must be feasible within a year, otherwise renewal of the existing accreditation or initial accreditation cannot be granted. The assessment panel reviews the manner in which the institution has remedied the deficiencies identified by NVAO and determines whether the programme meanwhile scores satisfactorily on all the statutory quality aspects.

By analogy with Article 5a. 2, second paragraph of the Act, the assessment panel that reviews the improvement must be approved by NVAO, as does the assessment panel that originally assessed the programme. The assessment panel that reviews the improvement comprises, as a minimum, two domain experts from the panel that originally assessed the programme.

11 Appeals

Before making a decision regarding an institutional quality assurance assessment, limited programme assessment, extensive programme assessment, limited initial accreditation or extensive initial accreditation, NVAO allows the board of the institution a term of two weeks to present its views concerning the intended decision. These two weeks fall within the statutory time frame of six months (for institutional quality assurance assessments, limited initial accreditations and extensive initial accreditations) or three months (for limited programme assessments and extensive programme assessments) within which NVAO is required to make its decision.

Once ratified, the decision is immediately forwarded to the board of the institution. At the same time, NVAO publishes its decision by placing it on its web site.

NVAO decisions are open to appeal.

Stakeholders may lodge an internal appeal with NVAO. The time frame for lodging internal appeals is six weeks. The processing of the appeal involves a hearing. NVAO makes its decision within twelve weeks after receiving the appeal. A decision after appeal may be postponed for no more than six weeks. Such postponement is communicated in writing. NVAO decisions after appeal are open to external appeals with the Administrative Jurisdiction Department of the Council of State. The time frame for lodging external appeals is six weeks. In principle, the Department gives its verdict six weeks after the session. This term can be extended by a maximum of six weeks.

Pending the internal or external appeal procedure, the Chair of the Administrative Jurisdiction Department of the Council of State may be requested to make provisional arrangements if urgency, due to the interests involved, so requires.

Accreditation framework for existing higher education programmes in Flanders

1 September 2009

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1 The structure of the accreditation framework

Under the Accreditation Treaty, NVAO is charged with the (initial) accreditation of existing bachelor's and master's programmes in the Netherlands and the Flemish Community. The present accreditation framework¹ refers to applications for accreditation submitted by the boards of higher education institutions in the Flemish Community.

In the accreditation process, NVAO has two methods to assess whether the programme sufficiently meets the generic quality standards (clause 58 of the Flemish Higher Education Act):

1. NVAO either grants accreditation based on a published external assessment report;
2. or NVAO grants accreditation based on an "accreditation abroad" already obtained by the programme, if – at the discretion of NVAO – this accreditation abroad was granted using a comparable methodological approach.

Chapter 2 describes the framework for the assessment of programmes in higher education based on an external assessment report.

To assess whether a higher education programme can be granted accreditation, the programme is assessed according to six themes (see chapter 2.1). These themes are:

1. Aims and objectives
2. Curriculum
3. Staff
4. Services
5. Internal quality assurance
6. Results

These themes are assessed according to standards and corresponding criteria, with a differentiation as to level (bachelor's or master's) and orientation (professional or academic) of the programme.

A higher education institution may also request a quality assessment agency to carry out an assessment of distinctive quality features of a programme. Such features can then be included in the assessment report. The assessment of distinctive quality features does not affect the outcome of an accreditation procedure (see Chapter 2.2).

To assess a programme, an assessment scale is used and assessment rules are applied that are based on a judgement of the underlying standards (see Chapter 2.3).

The final accreditation decision depends on the Accreditation Organisation's validation of the external assessment. To this end, criteria have been adopted for the evaluation of the procedure and the assessment report drawn up by the quality assessment agency (see Chapter 2.4).²

Chapter 3 describes the criteria according to which NVAO can declare an international accreditation equivalent. These criteria relate to the equivalence of the methodological

¹ Clause 10.1 of the Accreditation Treaty gives NVAO the authority to develop an "assessment framework". Based on this framework, NVAO assesses whether a programme sufficiently meets the generic quality standards. Assessment frameworks must be ratified by the Flemish government.

² Information on the procedure followed with respect to accreditation applications can be found in the Guidelines for Accreditations in the Flemish Community, drawn up by NVAO.

approach used by the accreditation organisation abroad. If equivalence is established, NVAO can accredit the programme involved on that basis.

Chapter 4 describes the transitional arrangement (period 2005 – 2013) for the assessment and accreditation of converted academic programmes provided by university colleges, concerning the inter-relatedness between education and research.

The explanatory part outlines:

- the clauses of the accreditation framework;
- accreditations granted by virtue of law during the transitional period following the introduction of the accreditation system.

Appendix 1 outlines the rules to be followed during the transitional period regarding the criteria in the accreditation framework that are relevant to the embedment in research of academic bachelor's and master's programmes ensuing from the conversion of two-cycle undergraduate programmes at university colleges.

2 Accreditation of programmes based on a published external assessment

2.1 Assessment framework

2.1.1 Aims and objectives

Standards	Criteria
Level and orientation: bachelor's programmes (professional orientation)	<p>The aims and objectives of the programme are focused on having the students master:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – general competences such as the capacity for logical thought and reasoning, the ability to acquire and process information, the ability for critical reflection and project-based work, creativity, the ability to perform simple supervision tasks, the ability to communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialists as well as laymen and a positive attitude towards life-long learning; – general professional competences such as the ability to work together as part of a team, a solution-oriented attitude in the sense of being able to define and analyse independently complex problematic situations in professional practice, and the ability to develop and apply effective strategies to resolve them and to develop a sense of social responsibility in connection with the professional practice; – specific professional competences at the level of a newly-qualified professional.
Level and orientation: bachelor's programmes (academic orientation)	<p>The aims and objectives of the programme are focused on having the students master:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – general competences such as the capacity for logical thought and reasoning, the ability to acquire and process information, the capacity for critical reflection, creativity, being able to perform simple management tasks, the ability to communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions both to specialists and laymen and a positive attitude towards life-long learning; – general academic competences such as a research attitude, knowledge of research methodologies and techniques and the ability to apply them adequately, the ability to collect relevant data in order to form an opinion about social, academic, scientific and ethical issues, an appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge and the ability to initiate problem-driven research; – an understanding of basic academic, discipline-related knowledge inherent to a certain domain of the sciences or the arts, systematic understanding of the key elements of a discipline which includes acquiring coherent and detailed knowledge that is inspired partly by the most recent developments in the discipline and an understanding of the structure of the discipline and its inter-relatedness with other disciplines.

Level and orientation: master's programmes	<p>The aims and objectives of the programme are focused on having the students master:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">– general competences at an advanced level such as the ability to reason and act in an academic manner, the ability to handle complex problems, the ability to reflect on one's own thoughts and work and the ability to convert this reflection into the development of more effective solutions, the ability to communicate one's own research and solutions to peers and laymen and the ability to develop an opinion in an uncertain context;– general academic competences at an advanced level such as the ability to apply research methods and techniques, the ability to design research, the ability to apply paradigms in the domain of the sciences or the arts and the ability to indicate the limits of paradigms, the ability to be original and creative with a view to continuously expanding knowledge and insight and the ability to collaborate in a multi-disciplinary environment;– advanced understanding of and insight into scientific, discipline-specific knowledge inherent to a certain domain of the sciences or the arts, insight into the most recent knowledge in the subject/discipline or parts thereof, the ability to follow and interpret the direction in which theory formation is developing, the ability to make an original contribution towards the body of knowledge of one or several parts of the subject/discipline and display specific competences characteristic to the subject/discipline such as designing, researching, analysing and diagnosing;– the competences needed for either independent research or the independent practice of the arts at the level of a newly-qualified researcher or artist or the general and specific professional competences needed for independent application of academic or artistic knowledge at the level of a newly-qualified professional.
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Subject-/discipline-specific requirements³	<p>The aims and objectives of the programme (expressed in the learning outcomes of the students) correspond with the requirements set by professional colleagues, both nationally and internationally, and the relevant professional field for a programme in the domain concerned (subject/discipline and/or professional practice or practice of the arts). In the case of regulated professions, the requirements correspond with the regulation or legislation concerned.</p>
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The learning outcomes of professional bachelor's programmes have been authenticated by the relevant professional field.

The learning outcomes of academic bachelor and master's programmes stem from requirements set by the academic and/or artistic discipline, international academic practice and, for programmes to which this applies, the practice in the relevant professional field.

³ The subject-/discipline-specific requirements operationalise the generic quality standards. In terms of hierarchy, they are subordinate to these standards.

2.1.2 Curriculum

Standards	Criteria
Requirements for professional / academic orientation	<p>The proposed curriculum corresponds with the following criteria for a professional or academic orientation:</p> <p>Professional orientation (bachelor's programmes):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Students develop their knowledge through the study of professional literature, the study of material derived from professional practice or practice of the arts and through interaction with the professional field, practice of the arts and/or (applied) research; – The curriculum has verifiable links with current developments in the professional field or the discipline; – The curriculum ensures the development of professional or artistic competences and has verifiable links with current professional practice. <p>Academic orientation (bachelor's and master's programmes):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Students develop their knowledge through the interaction between education and research (including research in the arts) within relevant disciplines; – The curriculum corresponds with current developments in the relevant academic or scientific discipline(s) through verifiable links with current academic or scientific theories; – The curriculum ensures the development of competences in the field of research and/or the development and practice of the arts; – Where appropriate, the curriculum has verifiable links with the current relevant professional practice.
Correspondence between the aims / objectives and the curriculum	<p>The curriculum is an adequate realisation of the intended learning outcomes of the programme with regard to the level, orientation and subject-/discipline-specific requirements.</p> <p>The intended learning outcomes are properly reflected in the educational goals of the curriculum or parts thereof.</p> <p>The contents of the curriculum enable students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.</p>
Consistency of the curriculum	<p>Students follow a curriculum that is coherent in terms of content.</p>
Workload	<p>The actual duration of the programme is assessed and corresponds with the statutory standards.</p> <p>The intended learning outcomes are attainable because factors relating to the curriculum that could hamper study progress are eliminated wherever possible.</p>

Admission requirements	<p>The structure and contents of the curriculum are in line with the qualifications of the incoming students⁴:</p> <p>Bachelor's programmes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Secondary school leaving certificate, <i>Diploma van het Hoger Onderwijs van het korte type met volledig leerplan</i>, <i>Diploma van het Hoger Onderwijs voor Sociale Promotie</i> or a diploma or certificate that is recognised as equivalent in accordance with a law, decree, European directive or other international agreement;• Predefined conditions set by the institution for individuals who do not meet the above mentioned requirements. <p>Advanced bachelor's programmes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A bachelor's degree, with a qualification or qualifications specified in more detail by the management of the institution, possibly supplemented with either an assessment concerning the fitness or capacity of the individual or a preparatory programme. <p>Master's programmes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A bachelor's degree, with a qualification or qualifications specified in more detail by the management of the institution, possibly supplemented with an individualised curriculum, a preparatory programme or a bridging programme. <p>Advanced master's programme:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A master's degree, with a qualification or qualifications specified in more detail by the management of the institution, possibly supplemented with either an assessment concerning the fitness or capacity of the individual or a preparatory programme.
Credits	<p>The curriculum meets the legal requirements regarding the association of credits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Bachelor's degree: at least 180 credits- Advanced bachelor's degree: at least 60 credits- Master's degree: at least 60 credits- Advanced master's degree: at least 60 credits
Coherence of structure and contents	<p>The educational concept is in line with the aims and objectives. The study methods correspond with this educational concept.</p>
Learning assessment	<p>By means of evaluations, tests and examinations, the students are assessed in an adequate manner which is insightful to them to determine whether they have achieved the intended learning outcomes of the programme or parts thereof.</p>
Master's thesis	<p>The master's programme is concluded with the master's thesis whereby the student demonstrates the ability for analytic and synthetic reasoning, independent problem solving at an academic level or artistic creation. The work reflects the general critical-reflective attitude or the research attitude of the student.</p> <p>The master's thesis corresponds to at least a fifth of the total number of credits with a minimum of 15 and a maximum of 30 credits.</p>

⁴ The admission requirements are laid down in the Flemish Higher Education Act. With effect from 2005/06, the admission requirements pertaining to higher education have been laid down in the Act on Flexible Pathways in Higher Education. In terms of content, these admission requirements are identical to those listed here.

2.1.3 Staff commitment

Standards	Criteria
Requirements for professional / academic orientation	<p>The programme meets the following criteria for the deployment of staff for a programme with a professional or an academic orientation.</p> <p>Professional orientation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Teaching is principally provided by staff that link the programme to the professional practice or practice of the arts. <p>Academic orientation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Teaching is principally provided by researchers who contribute to the development of the subject/discipline (including research in the arts). – In addition, and where appropriate, sufficient staff will be deployed with knowledge of and insight in the professional field or practice of the arts concerned.
Quantity of staff	Sufficient staff are deployed to realise the intended quality of the programme.
Quality of staff	The staff deployed are sufficiently qualified to ensure that the aims and objectives of the programme, in terms of content, didactics and organisation, are achieved.

2.1.4 Services

Standards	Criteria
Facilities	Housing and facilities are sufficient for the realisation of the curriculum.
Tutoring	<p>Tutoring and the provision of information to students are adequate in view of study progress.</p> <p>Tutoring and information provision are geared to students' needs.</p>

2.1.5 Internal Quality Assurance system

Standards	Criteria
Evaluation of results	The curriculum is periodically evaluated in the light of verifiable objectives and other measures.
Measures for improvement	The outcomes of the evaluation form the basis for verifiable measures for improvement that contribute to the achievement of the objectives.
Involvement of staff, students, alumni and the professional field	Staff, students, alumni and the relevant professional field are actively involved in the internal quality assurance system.

2.1.6 Results

Standards	Criteria
Achieved learning outcomes	The achieved learning outcomes correspond with the aims and objectives regarding level, orientation and subject-/discipline-specific requirements.
Success rate	Target figures regarding success rate have been formulated on the basis of a comparison with relevant other programmes. The programme's success rate is in line with these target figures.

2.2 Distinctive quality features

The aim of accreditation is to establish whether a programme complies with generic quality standards. To this end, the programme is assessed according to the assessment framework referred to in Chapter 2. In order to emphasise any distinctive quality features, an institution may additionally request the Accreditation Organisation to assess distinctive quality features of a programme. This can lead to an annotation in the accreditation report that the programme does indeed possess this distinctive quality feature. The assessment of a distinctive quality feature has no influence on the accreditation decision of the Accreditation Organisation.

Distinctive quality features must fulfil the following criteria.

Standards	Criteria
Differentiation and profiling	The feature contributes in a meaningful way to differentiation and profiling in higher education.
Quality	The feature contributes to the quality of the programme.
Specification	The effects of the feature for the quality of the programme itself (enrolment, curriculum, teaching and learning process, output, services and staff quality) have been operationalised.

2.3 Assessment rules

2.3.1 Assessment of the standards

The assessment of the programme is performed by an external assessment panel (panel of experts) co-ordinated by a quality assessment agency that lays down the assessment protocol. The assessment panel judges the standards in the assessment framework according to the following assessment scale:

- excellent
- good
- satisfactory
- unsatisfactory.

2.3.2 Assessment of the programme

For a positive final conclusion regarding the programme, each theme must be judged as satisfactory. The assessment panels judge the themes in the assessment framework according to a two-point scale: satisfactory or unsatisfactory. The assessment of a theme in the assessment framework is based on the assessments of the separate standards of that theme. The assessment panel has to demonstrate clearly how the assessment of the different standards led to its final conclusion concerning that theme. In other words, the panel has to clarify how – given the criteria in this accreditation framework and the reference framework employed – it has arrived at its assessment of a theme on the basis of the analyses of the underlying standards.

In its final conclusion regarding the quality of the programme, the assessment panel needs to indicate how its conclusions are based on facts, its analysis of the evidence and its assessment of the programme on the basis of this accreditation framework and the reference framework employed. In its final conclusion regarding the programme, the assessment panel indicates whether, based on the standards in the assessment framework, sufficient generic quality standards are in place to warrant a positive final conclusion regarding the programme.

With respect to programmes comprising various modes of study, as referred to in Article 59 ter of the Flemish Higher Education Act, a final conclusion can only be positive if the assessment shows that sufficient generic quality standards are in place for each mode of study.

2.4 Assessment rules for accreditation

2.4.1 Evaluation of external assessments

The quality assessment agency publishes the report regarding the quality of a programme as adopted by the assessment panel. The report also outlines the procedure followed in the external assessment.

The Accreditation Organisation verifies whether the external assessment has been conducted in a regular and conclusive manner.

A regular external assessment publication is structured in accordance with the format outlined in the quality assurance protocol. It comprises an assessment based on the generic quality standards and the assessment criteria listed in this accreditation framework.

An assessment report is conclusive if it provides insight into the quality of the composition of the assessment panel and permits a thorough investigation into the presence of sufficient generic quality standards.

In this manner, a number of procedural and substantive requirements are verified.

With regard to the procedural requirements, the Accreditation Organisation verifies whether:

- 1. the assessment panel followed the assessment protocol laid down by the quality assessment agency;
- 2. the reference framework used by the assessment panel contains the themes and standards of the accreditation framework for existing programmes formulated by the Accreditation Organisation, including a subject-/discipline-specific interpretation;
- 3. the assessment panel adequately applied the assessment rules described in this accreditation framework;
- 4. the procedure followed conforms to the assessment framework for the procedures used by the VLIR [Flemish Interuniversity Council] and the VLHORA [Council of Flemish University Colleges] as quality assessment agencies or in the regulations for the recognition of other quality assessment agencies.

With regard to the substantive requirements, the Accreditation Organisation verifies whether:

- 1. the quality judgement of the assessment panel is, in part, based on a comparison with similar programmes and, if possible, with international standards applicable to programmes in the domain concerned;
- 2. the report adopted by the assessment panel and published by the quality assessment agency contains sufficient evidence to verify whether or not the programme fulfils the standards of the assessment framework (Chapter 2) and whether sufficient generic quality standards are in place. The report includes at least the six themes listed in this accreditation framework, paying attention to all the standards in each theme. Each standard is assessed on a four-point scale; the themes are assessed based on the underlying assessments of the standards. The assessments are substantiated with evidence and analyses as thoroughly as possible. The report is finalised with a summarised conclusion on the programme;
- 3. the report also provides insight into the quality of the assessment panel (the panel of experts) that assessed the programme. Information is provided about the size and composition of the assessment panel with reference to the knowledge and experience contributed by each member, as well as his or her independence, expertise and authority.

2.4.2 Assessment rules for accreditation

If the Accreditation Organisation determines that the external assessment panel took great care in formulating its judgement⁵, it addresses the question whether the programme has sufficient generic quality standards in place.

In making this decision, the Accreditation Organisation applies the same assessment rules as the assessment agency.

The essence of these assessment rules has been laid down in the Regulation for Decision-Making Procedures concerning (Initial) Accreditation of Programmes in the Flemish Community [In Dutch: "Reglement tot bepaling van bestuursbeginselen die van toepassing zijn bij de besluitvorming inzake accreditatie en toets nieuwe opleiding ten aanzien van opleidingen in de Vlaamse Gemeenschap"]. Clauses 7 and 9 of this regulation read:

*"Clause 7. An (initial) accreditation decision is positive if the overall mark for each theme described in the (initial) accreditation framework is satisfactory.
If, at the discretion of NVAO, standards that are rated "unsatisfactory" are balanced out by strengths demonstrated within other standards of that same theme, the theme will be rated as "satisfactory".*

[...]

Clause 9. If a programme comprises various modes of study, as referred to in Article 59 ter of the Flemish Higher Education Act, a theme can only be rated "satisfactory" if such rating is awarded regarding that theme for each separate mode of study."

⁵ If need be, following depletion of the options for remediation referred to in clauses 58bis and 59bis of the Flemish Higher Education Act.

3 Accreditation of programmes based on accreditation abroad

This chapter operationalises the implementation of Clause 60 sexies of the Flemish Higher Education Act. This clause stipulates that in the assessment of accreditation applications for programmes that have already been granted an international accreditation, the Accreditation Organisation must verify whether such international accreditation has been granted in accordance with a methodological approach that compares with the accreditations granted on the basis of an external review.

Criteria for equivalence

General

The equivalence of a concrete accreditation granted by a foreign accreditation body is assessed by criteria for equivalence whose contents can be clustered around five themes:

- - the foreign accreditation decision is based on a positive assessment of the quality of the programme concerned;
- - the foreign accreditation decision is of a recent enough date;
- - the foreign accreditation decision is based on a public external review;
- - the foreign accreditation organisation has an adequate organisational structure;
- - the foreign accreditation organisation applies valid quality standards.

In principle, all criteria for equivalence per theme should be met before the Accreditation Organisation can grant an accreditation.

Theme 1

The foreign accreditation decision is based on a positive assessment of the quality of the programme concerned.

The foreign accreditation decision or the preceding review should demonstrate that the quality of the programme concerned was positively assessed. The international accreditation may pertain to other programmes as well, as long as there is a separate positive assessment that refers specifically to the programme concerned.

Theme 2

The foreign accreditation decision is of a recent enough date.

The foreign accreditation decision must be of a recent enough date to allow a reasonable judgement to be made as to the equivalence. For this reason, the period of time between the date on which the accreditation to be recognised as equivalent was granted and the date on which the accreditation application was submitted to NVAO must not exceed more than 90 calendar days.

Theme 3

The foreign accreditation decision is based on a public external review

The foreign accreditation decision must be based on a public external review of the programme concerned, of the discipline under which the programme resorts or of the institution offering the programme. The external review should be laid down in a public report.

The external review must be carried out according to previously communicated quality guidelines. These guidelines must have been issued by an organisation that functions independently from higher education institutions, such as an international association or organisation, the legislative or executive powers of the country or state concerned, the foreign accreditation organisation itself, an assessment agency recognised by the said accreditation organisation or an assessment agency that has signed an administrative agreement with the said accreditation organisation in which its independent functioning is stipulated.

The external review must be carried out by an independent panel of experts consisting of peers and one or more students, unless no candidacy for a student expert was fulfilled and/or student involvement in external reviews concerning the programme, the discipline or the institution is organised in a different way.

Among the experts in the panel, at least the following expertise must have been represented:

- subject-/discipline-specific expertise as to the subject/discipline concerned and the professional practice of that discipline. Insofar as relevant, this expertise must be supplemented by expertise regarding the international development of that discipline;
- educational expertise and expertise in the field of didactics;
- assessment expertise.

Theme 4

The foreign accreditation organisation has an adequately functioning organisational structure. The international accreditation must have been granted by an autonomous accreditation organisation. In this context, “autonomous” means that the political authority of the country or state concerned and the institution concerned cannot decisively influence the decision-making process of the accreditation organisation. The fact that an appeal can be lodged against decisions taken by the accreditation organisation does not, as such, imply that the accreditation organisation does not function autonomously. However, a precondition is that an appeal can only lead to adjournment or annulment of the disputed accreditation decision. Lodging an appeal must never lead to another authority taking a positive or a negative accreditation decision. If that were the case, the final accreditation decision would be taken by another (public) body and not by the accreditation organisation, which is a prerequisite for autonomy.

The international accreditation must have been granted by an organisation that operates a functioning and continuous accreditation practice according to a set of distinctive working rules. The accreditation must not have been granted on an *ad-hoc* basis. For that reason, the accreditation of programmes must be the primary objective (or one of the primary objectives) of the foreign accreditation organisation.

As a guarantee for its continuity, the foreign accreditation organisation must have been recognised by a governmental authority. This recognition may be focused on the academic and/or professional orientation.

The foreign accreditation organisation must keep in close touch with its stakeholders in higher education in the country or state concerned, so as to be up to date where developments in higher education are concerned.

Finally, the Accreditation Organisation verifies whether the foreign accreditation organisation has an apparently adequate internal quality assurance system in place and operates in accordance with such a system.

Theme 5

The foreign accreditation organisation applies valid quality standards.

The foreign accreditation organisation must have assessed the same themes and standards that are assessed in the Flemish accreditation framework. This means that the foreign accreditation organisation must be able to demonstrate that it has assessed the following:

- the coherence and relevance of the intended learning outcomes of the specific programme or group of programmes or the manner in which this coherence and relevance is guaranteed for the programmes offered at the institution;
- the coherence of the curriculum of the specific programme or group of programmes or the manner in which the curriculum is structured within the institution;
- the quality of the staff deployed for the specific programme or group of programmes or for the programmes as a whole offered at the institution;
- the quality of the services and facilities for that specific programme or group of programmes or for the programmes as a whole offered at the institution;
- the realisation of an internal quality assurance system as regards the specific programme or group of programmes or the programmes as a whole offered at the institution;
- the quality of the achieved learning outcomes of the specific programme or group of programmes or of the programmes as a whole offered at the institution.

The foreign accreditation organisation must have based its quality assessment on the Dublin descriptors regarding the quality of higher education or another coherent set of criteria that does not differ substantially from the Dublin descriptors.

The international accreditation should give a clear indication as to the professional or academic orientation of the programme.

In its assessment, the foreign accreditation organisation should have demonstrably verified the extent to which the specific programme or group of programmes or the programmes as a whole offered at the institution meet broadly accepted and well-documented subject-/discipline-specific requirements.

4 Transitional arrangement for the assessment and accreditation of converted academic programmes at university colleges, with regard to the inter-relatedness of education and research (2005-2013 period)

4.1 Introduction

An essential characteristic of a bachelor or master's programme with an academic orientation is that the programme reflects a sufficient degree of:

- academic support and
- inter-relatedness between education and research.

This hallmark of its academic nature, comprising the two aforementioned aspects⁶, is hereinafter referred to as "embedding education in research" or "embedment in research".

Various criteria, standards and themes of the assessment framework contained in the accreditation framework present the requirement for programmes with an academic orientation of reflecting such characteristics.

Two-cycle university college programmes that have been converted to programmes with an academic orientation will not be sufficiently embedded in research right from the introduction of the converted programme. Undoubtedly, conversion to programmes with an academic orientation is a difficult task for many of these programmes, especially with regard to the aspects mentioned above. These programmes will be embedded in research in the years ahead. The term "embedding in research" denotes the process by which the educational content of a programme is gradually embedded in research until the programme meets all the requirements set for programmes with an academic orientation. This embedding process should be finalised by the end of the academic year 2012/13. In accreditation procedures based on external assessment reports published after 1 January 2005, the academic nature of the programmes under consideration is assessed under a transitional arrangement. In particular, the requirements for embedment in research will be lowered for these programmes in the period up to 2013. As regards all the other standards and themes in the accreditation framework, these programmes must meet all the requirements of the accreditation framework with effect from 2005, just like other programmes with an academic orientation.

This transitional arrangement has been laid down as a supplement to Clause 124 § 9 in the Flemish Higher Education Act:

Clause 124 § 9 The Accreditation Organisation assesses the presence of sufficient generic quality standards in programmes with an academic orientation provided by university colleges, as referred to in § 1 and §4 and in Clause 125 ter, taking into consideration the transitional nature of the academic support and the intertwining of education and research in the programmes, provided the university college has submitted the accreditation dossier before the end of the 2012/13 academic year.

This chapter aims to clarify the transitional arrangement with regard to the assessment elements in the accreditation framework. To that end, we will first explore which themes of the accreditation framework comprise standards or criteria that are directly related to a programme's embedding in research. Subsequently, we discuss how the criteria involved are assessed under the transitional arrangement outlined above.

⁶ The first aspect primarily pertains to the academic "environment" of the programme, i.e., mainly the manner in which teaching staff are actively involved in research. The second aspect relates to the manner in which students are brought into contact with research.

This transitional arrangement applies to programmes with an academic orientation provided by university colleges and resulting from the conversion of two-cycle programmes, for which no assessment reports have been published by the end of 2004. It also applies to programmes with an academic orientation provided by university colleges and resulting from the conversion of postgraduate programmes or the conversion of those departments of adult education centres that have been taken over by university colleges. This transitional arrangement does not apply to the programmes with an academic orientation resulting from the conversion of two-cycle university college programmes whose assessment report has been published before the end of 2004. These programmes may be granted transitional accreditation until 1 October 2012 or 1 October 2013, depending on whether the assessment report was published in 2003 or 2004. For these programmes, a progress test will be organised by the end of 2007 to assess the state of affairs with regard to their embedding in research. This progress test will be conducted under the responsibility of the Recognition Commission. In order to be granted accreditation, these programmes must meet all of the requirements in the accreditation framework by 2012 or 2013, respectively.

4.2 Related themes and standards of the accreditation framework

A study of all the themes, standards and criteria in the accreditation framework shows that the following themes are directly related to embedment in research: Aims and objectives, Curriculum, Staff commitment, Services. The following standards are relevant in this regard:

- *Aims and objectives*
 - Level and orientation, bachelor's programmes (academic orientation)
 - Level and orientation, master's programmes
 - Subject-/discipline-specific requirements
- *Curriculum:*
 - Requirements for professional and academic orientation
 - Relationship between aims and objectives / curriculum content
 - Master's thesis
- *Staff commitment*
 - Academic orientation
- *Services*
 - Facilities (research-related infrastructure relevant to teaching)

Appendix 1 presents all the themes, criteria and standards that pertain to programmes with an academic orientation. The criteria or sub-criteria printed in *italics* denote those that are relevant with regard to the assessment of the transitional nature of the programme's embedding in research.

4.3 Assessment of the transitional nature

The essence of the transitional assessment is that the requirements for criteria related to embedment in research are lowered during the transitional period (2005-2013). A general principle in the transitional arrangement is that the programme must make a reasonable case, on the basis of its progress at the time of assessment and its plans with regard to the further embedding of its curriculum in research, which by 2013 will fully meet all the requirements in the accreditation framework.

The procedure implemented for the accreditation of these programmes in the period from 2005 to 2013 corresponds to the general procedure for the accreditation of existing programmes, as outlined in the draft accreditation framework for existing programmes. Along with the plans for the further embedment in research, the conversion dossier (including the additional information requested by the Recognition Commission) constitutes a source of information for the assessment panels in this respect. These panels are responsible for assessing:

- whether the progress made in embedding the programme in research, up until the time of the external assessment, corresponds to the intentions specified in the conversion dossier and the plans for further embedment in research; and
- whether the progress made and the further plans make a reasonable case that the programme will fully meet the requirements for embedment in research laid down in the accreditation framework by 2013 at the latest.

However, with effect from October 2013, only the actual progress made will be taken into consideration in the accreditation of these programmes. No account will be taken of potential progress by way of compensating for any failure in building up sufficient capacity.

The theme of “Aims and objectives”⁷ warrants a specific approach in this respect. A conversion to programmes with an academic orientation is obviously intended to have the programmes meet the criteria the accreditation framework sets for the aims and objectives of programmes with an academic orientation. On the other hand, most programmes will not yet be able to fully realise this academic nature. For that reason, feasible aims and objectives will be drawn up during the transition period, which will gradually evolve into the aims and objectives for programmes with an academic orientation. This means that in the assessments, a distinction will be made between:

- *long-term aims and objectives*: the aims and objectives of the programme (with an academic orientation) with regard to competencies to be achieved following completion of the embedment process;
- *short-term aims and objectives*: the aims and objectives of the programme with regard to competencies sought to be achieved during the transition period. When assessing the programme, the assessment panels must verify whether the programme is achieving these short-term aims and objectives and whether it is likely to achieve its long-term aims and objectives by 2013 at the latest.

In the years ahead, the conversion process will gradually be accomplished. Bachelor’s programmes with an academic orientation will be introduced in the 2004/05 or 2005/06 academic years, the subsequent master’s programmes will start in the 2007/08 or 2008/09 academic years. This must be taken into account in the assessment. For the accreditation of the university college programmes involved this means in concrete terms:

- that the initial years will mainly focus on descriptions of the aims and objectives, the curriculum and the intentions with regard to staff commitment and services/facilities related to embedment in research,
- that gradually more attention will be focused on the progress made with regard to embedment in research, for the bachelor’s programmes from the 2005/06 or 2006/07 academic years onward and for the master’s programmes from the 2008/09 or 2009/10 academic years onward.

4.4 Scope of accreditation criteria in the transition period

The supplement to the Higher Education Act stipulates that university college bachelor’s and master’s programmes (academic orientation) to which the transitional arrangement applies will be granted accreditation for four years when they apply for accreditation under the transitional arrangement before the end of the 2008/09 academic year. Such programmes applying for accreditation after this date will be granted accreditation for six years. For that reason, a distinction is made between the period from 2005 to 2008 and the period from 2008 to 2012 in the application of the accreditation criteria. This defines the progress programmes must achieve in each period in order to make a reasonable case that they will fully meet the requirements set down in the accreditation framework by 2013. This means that these requirements involve

⁷ The term “aims and objectives” in the Flemish Higher Education Act and the accreditation framework indicates the competences the programme seeks to impart on its students.

benchmarks rather than strict criteria. Similarly, the point of time indicated should be regarded as a reference date rather than a fixed fact.

The table in Appendix 1 presents an overview of the transitional scope of the criteria from the draft accreditation framework that are relevant to the embedment in research of bachelor's and master's programmes (academic orientation) resulting from the conversion of two-cycle undergraduate programmes provided by university colleges. In the transition period up to 2013, the requirements to be met under these criteria will be lowered for the programmes involved. No transitional assessment will be implemented for the other criteria, standards and themes that are not related to embedment in research.

The table is structured as follows.

- Column 1 describes all the themes, standards and criteria from the draft accreditation framework for existing programmes relating to programmes with an academic orientation; the elements that pertain to embedment in research are printed in italics.
- Column 2 describes the related scope of the transitional assessment of the criteria or sub-criteria pertaining to embedment in research with a view to accreditation of such programmes, when the assessment is conducted prior to 2008.
- Column 3 describes the same for programmes whose assessment is conducted in 2008 or beyond.
- By way of explanation for quality assessment agencies and the Recognition Commission, column 4 indicates what information may be used to determine whether the programme meets the criteria with regard to embedment in research. This information pertains to both actual achievements and plans. The conversion dossier, which specifies the state of affairs regarding the programme's embedment in research at the time the dossier is compiled and the intentions with regard to the programme's embedment in research, is used as a source of information in this respect, along with the plans for continued embedment in research. Other essential information documents are the additional policy plans regarding the programme's embedment in research, covering the period up to 2013.

The conversion dossier also serves as a reference for the progress test that will be conducted under the responsibility of the Recognition Commission. The progress test is foreseen for the end of 2007, which constitutes additional grounds for opting for 2008 as the pivot point in the transitional arrangement.

Explanatory notes

General

Points of departure

Accreditation is defined as “the formal recognition of a programme based on a decision by an independent organisation, stating that the programme fulfils predefined minimum requirements regarding quality and level”. Such recognition depends on the satisfactory fulfilment of generic quality standards. By granting a formal quality mark, accreditation is the culmination of the assessment of the quality of programmes. The mark is granted by an Accreditation Organisation after validating an external assessment report drafted by an assessment panel coordinated by a quality assessment agency. The subject of accreditation is the programme. The initiative for the application for accreditation lies with the institution.

By signing the Bologna Declaration, all European countries concerned decided to implement an educational model of two cycles in the pursuit of a European Higher Education Area. In line with this, many countries implemented accreditation systems in order to determine the level – bachelor’s or master’s – and quality of their programmes. This also bolsters the international mobility of students.

The Accreditation Organisation for Flanders was established through a treaty between the Flemish and the Dutch governments. This treaty defines the tasks, composition and competence of the Accreditation Organisation. The treaty also regulates how the accreditation framework to be set down by the Accreditation Organisation acquires legal force.

The Accreditation Organisation decides separately on the accreditation of bachelor’s and master’s programmes. This does not alter the fact that related bachelor’s and master’s programmes can be assessed jointly. However, the assessment panel is obliged to give an overall mark – satisfactory or unsatisfactory – for each programme (i.e., separately for bachelor’s and subsequent master’s programmes).

Accreditation framework

The Flemish Higher Education Act and the Accreditation Framework for existing programmes dated 14 February 2003, formulated by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands (NAO) were taken as the point of departure for drafting this accreditation framework. The views of the organisations consulted prompted us to, on the one hand, endeavour to achieve the best possible agreement between the Dutch framework and the Flemish framework, while on the other deviating from the Dutch framework when necessitated by stipulations in the Flemish Higher Education Act or differences between Flemish and Dutch higher education. Various aspects of these Explanatory Notes explicitly refer to the regulations of the Flemish higher education system. Similarly, the themes, standards and criteria are explained in the context of the Flemish situation.

Accreditation of existing programmes is based on an assessment of six themes:

1. Aims and objectives
2. Curriculum
3. Staff commitment
4. Services
5. Internal quality assurance
6. Results

These themes are subdivided into standards and criteria, differentiated according to level (bachelor's or master's) and orientation (professional or academic) of the programme.

The table below shows how the themes and standards from the accreditation framework correspond to the generic quality standards laid down in the Flemish Higher Education Act (Clause 58).

Generic quality standards laid down in the Flemish Higher Education Act	Accreditation framework for existing programmes in Flanders
<p>Educational contents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nature and level of the curriculum - Consistency of the curriculum - Workload - Correspondence between intended learning outcomes and content 	<p>Aims and objectives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Level and orientation: bachelor's degree, professional higher education - Level and orientation: bachelor's degree, academic higher education - Level and orientation: master's degree - Subject-/discipline-specific requirements <p>Curriculum:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Requirements for professional / academic orientation - Correspondence between the aims and objectives and the curriculum - Consistency of the curriculum - Workload - Admission requirements - Credits
<p>Educational process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Harmony between design and contents - Student counselling - Insightful evaluation and testing 	<p>Curriculum</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Harmony between design and contents - Learning assessment - Master's thesis <p>Services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - tutoring
<p>Material facilities, quality of staff, organisation and internal quality assurance Methods for self-evaluation</p>	<p>Staff commitment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Requirements for professional / academic orientation - Quantity of staff - Quality of staff <p>Services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Facilities <p>Internal quality assurance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Evaluation of results - Measures for improvement - Involvement of staff, students, alumni and the professional field
	<p>Assessment by the assessment panel of the quality of the self-evaluation (including the methods used)</p>

Wherever possible, the subdivision of the accreditation framework, the choice of themes, standards and criteria and the level of abstraction applied have been geared to the Dutch accreditation framework.

Subject-/discipline-specific framework of reference

An assessment of the programme cannot be based solely on general criteria pertaining to aims and objectives, curriculum, facilities, staff commitment and internal quality assurance. The panel must expressly examine whether the programme fulfils the requirements for this specific programme and the field of study concerned as set by professional colleagues at home and abroad as well as by the professional practice or practice of the arts. In cases of regulated professions, account must also be taken of the regulations or rules concerned. The assessment panel must therefore be able to assess both the subject-/discipline-specific quality as well as the general quality of the programme. This entails specific requirements with regard to the composition of the assessment panel.

In addition, the assessment panel must have a subject-/discipline-specific reference framework in the light of which the programme is assessed. For this purpose, the quality assessment agency draws up a procedure in the assessment protocol. For academically-oriented programmes, connection can be sought with national and international developments in the subject/discipline. The Flemish Higher Education Act stipulates that professionally-oriented bachelor's programmes must fulfil "profession-specific competences" and that academic programmes must fulfil "specific profession-oriented competences required for independent use of knowledge". These competences must enable academic graduates to either conduct independent research / practice the arts independently or deploy academic / scientific / artistic knowledge independently at the level of a newly-qualified professional. These provisions constitute the statutory basis for subject-/discipline-specific reference frameworks. Without such frameworks, a quality assessment agency is unable to assess whether a programme fulfils the requirements demanded of it by the field of study and/or the relevant professional practice. The quality assessment agency may adopt any existing professional profiles and curriculum profiles, provided these profiles are supported in the sector and the professional field and tie in with relevant developments in the professional field and in the field of study. The quality assessment agency will have to indicate the procedure for drafting a subject-/discipline-specific reference framework. If need be, reference frameworks drawn up for earlier assessments or reference frameworks provided by the programmes may be used, insofar as these are sufficiently current and carry sufficient support within the subject/discipline and relevant national and international professional practice. Ultimately, the assessment panel is responsible for establishing a subject-/discipline-specific framework.

Embedding programmes with an academic orientation in research

An essential characteristic of programmes with an academic orientation is that the programme is supported by research and that teaching and research are intertwined. After all, teaching in academically-oriented programmes should be founded on research. In various places in the accreditation framework, requirements have been formulated regarding the link with research. These requirements refer to:

- the aims and objectives of the programmes (in accordance with the provisions in Clause 58 of the Flemish Higher Education Act);
- the curriculum (requirements regarding academic orientation, such as interaction between research and teaching, tying in with academic developments and current scientific theories, guaranteeing competences in the area of research and the master's thesis);
- the staff (teaching is predominantly undertaken by researchers who contribute to the development of their subject/discipline);
- the material facilities concerning the research-related infrastructure relevant to education.

These requirements apply to all programmes with an academic orientation. Validation of these requirements should be undertaken in the light of the research activities of the staff (including research projects, doctoral research and scientific output). The interpretation of these requirements will depend on the type of programme (bachelor's, master's or advanced master's degree) and the phase in the course. As a rule, embedding the programme in research will be more pronounced in the master's programmes than in the bachelor's programmes. Research competences will be introduced particularly in master's programmes and will be most pronounced in the master's thesis.

As possible aims and objectives of a master's programme, the Flemish Higher Education Act mentions on the one hand imparting the necessary academic competences that will enable the graduate to conduct independent research or to practice the arts independently at the level of a newly-qualified researcher or artist, and on the other, imparting general and specific profession-oriented competences necessary for the graduate to use academic or artistic knowledge independently at the level of a newly-qualified professional.

Depending on the subject-/discipline-specific nature of the programme, the requirements for the programmes will be specified in more detail. Thus, for instance, in the case of the master's programmes that are specifically aimed at training in research (such as "research master's programmes"), the subject-/discipline-specific requirements should run parallel with the international standards for such programmes. In addition, in assessing the aims and objectives of these programmes, more weight is given to the acquiring of competences necessary for conducting independent research at the level of a newly-qualified researcher and stricter requirements are set for embedding the programmes in research. This means that stricter requirements will be imposed regarding various aspects, including the research capacity of the staff and their experience in training newly-qualified researchers, a wide research orientation in the curriculum, the academic or scientific interpretation of the master's thesis and the connection with current academic or scientific developments.

External quality assessment and accreditation

The point of departure for the accreditation process is that it is a continuation of the external quality assurance. External quality assurance is particularly aimed at improving quality, while accreditation is aimed at assessing whether the requirements for generic quality have been fulfilled, as described in Chapter 2 of this accreditation framework.

VLIR [Flemish Interuniversity Council] and *VLHORA* [Council of Flemish University Colleges] are responsible for co-ordinating the external assessment of the statutory registered institutions for higher education. All bachelor's and master's programmes organised by these institutions must participate in the assessments co-ordinated by *VLIR* and *VLHORA*. *VLHORA* co-ordinates the joint external assessment of professionally-oriented bachelor's programmes. *VLIR* co-ordinates the joint external assessment of programmes that are provided by the universities and

by the statutory registered institutions that are neither a university nor a university college. Together *VLIR* and *VHLORA* co-ordinate the joint external assessment of the academically-oriented bachelor's and master's programmes that are provided by university colleges within the framework of an association, and of the academic programmes jointly organised by a university and university college.

With effect from the external assessments that are conducted on the basis of self-evaluation reports completed before 1 September 2010, *VLUHR* [Council of Flemish Universities and University Colleges] will take over the role of quality assessment agency from *VLIR* and *VHLORA*.

The Flemish Higher Education Act prescribes clustered external assessment of similar programmes at all universities or university colleges and other statutory registered institutions within the framework of the external quality assessment by *VLIR/VHLORA/VLUHR*. Assessment panels carry out the external assessment of the programmes or clusters of programmes. The quality assessment agencies publish the result of the assessment of the programmes in a report adopted and made public by the assessment panel.

The following procedure for accreditation is incorporated in the Flemish Higher Education Act. The Accreditation Organisation decides to grant accreditation, if based on the report of an external assessment it is of the opinion that the programme fulfils the generic quality standards. The Accreditation Organisation assesses the report of the quality assessment agency. The report of the quality assessment agency contains a summarised conclusion on whether the programme fulfils the requirements for generic quality, as described in Chapter 2 of this accreditation framework.

External assessments for the purpose of accreditation can be performed by *VLIR*, *VLHORA* and at a later date, *VLUHR* or another quality assessment agency recognised by the Accreditation Organisation. Alongside *VLIR*, *VLHORA* and *VLUHR*, only quality assessment agencies recognised by the Accreditation Organisation may perform external assessments for the purpose of accreditation.

For external assessments relating to external quality assurance that are performed under the responsibility of *VLIR*, *VLHORA* or *VLUHR* and used as external assessments for the purpose of accreditation, the report and the procedure followed must fulfil the requirements set by the Accreditation Organisation.

It is of the utmost importance that the implementation of the accreditation system does not lead to corrosion of the improvement function of the external quality assurance, which may be regarded as an important achievement of the former assessment system. Ensuring the purpose of quality improvement is the responsibility of *VLIR*, *VLHORA* or, as the case may be, *VLUHR*, as part of their statutory task of co-ordinating external quality assurance.

Scope

Accreditation relates to programmes of statutory registered institutions and programmes of non-statutory registered institutions.

Accreditation is a precondition for registering a programme on the Flemish Higher Education Register. Registration on the Higher Education Register is a precondition for a programme to award recognised bachelor's and master's degrees. For the period 2003—2006, the Flemish Higher Education Act, in anticipation of a new funding system, provides university colleges and universities with individually established ("frozen") budgets. Under the Flemish Higher Education Act, only programmes that are registered on the Higher Education Register will be eligible for funding. It is to be expected that in the future funding system, the funding of programmes provided by statutory recognised institutions will depend on their having attained accreditation.

Under the Flemish Higher Education Act, other institutions may be registered, provide recognised bachelor's and master's programmes and award recognised bachelor's and master's degrees. A precondition is that the programmes concerned are accredited and registered on the Higher Education Register. Programmes that are provided by these registered institutions do not have to comply with all the provisions of the Flemish Higher Education Act, for instance, the language regulation. These non-statutory registered institutions are not funded by the government.

Embedding programmes in research

Within the framework of embedding programmes in research, two-cycle university college programmes may be converted to academically-oriented bachelor's and master's programmes in association with a university. By the end of the period of accreditation by virtue of law (the end of the academic year 2012/13), all academic programmes provided by universities and university colleges must fulfil the same accreditation requirements. These requirements are described in Chapter 2.1 of this accreditation framework.

A number of two-cycle university college programmes may not be able to shortly fulfil the requirements laid down in this assessment framework regarding the criteria pertaining to embedding the programme in research. Moreover, within the associations, embedding these programmes in research will still take a number of years. For this reason, during the transitional period up to 2013, these programmes may request accreditation under a transitional arrangement. This transitional arrangement is described in Chapter 4 and applies to programmes whose first assessment report was published after 31 December 2004. These programmes must apply for accreditation within one year after the publication of this report, at a time when the embedment process is still in progress. The time of accreditation in the transition period will strongly affect the extent to which the embedment process has already been realised. In the period up to 2013, assessment of the embedding in research of programmes with an academic orientation provided by university colleges that are making use of the transitional arrangement will be based on the extent to which both the criteria from the accreditation framework as well as the intentions for embedment of the programmes have been realised. This transitional assessment also applies to programmes with an academic orientation provided by university colleges that ensue from the conversion of advanced programmes or the conversion of programmes that were taken over from adult education centres.

In the self-evaluation document, the programme must indicate to what extent embedment in research has been realised and what steps it is taking to fully meet the criteria from the accreditation framework at the end of the transitional period. This is reviewed by the assessment panel. For programmes that are accredited under the transitional arrangement, the accreditation term is reduced to four years provided the institution submits its application for accreditation prior to the end of the academic year 2008/09 and to six years when the institution submits its application for accreditation between 1 October 2009 and the end of the academic year 2012/13. Programmes that do not wish to appeal to the transitional assessment of academic/scientific support and the intertwining of education and research must state this explicitly in their self-evaluation.

Higher Education in the Arts

Flanders has a limited number of one-cycle art programmes that are being converted into professionally-oriented bachelor's programmes. In addition, there are two-cycle programmes in the field of the audio-visual and visual arts, music and performing arts. These programmes are being converted into academically-oriented programmes; they must be provided within the framework of an association with a university and must fulfil the requirements that are demanded of bachelor's and master's programmes with academic orientation, as formulated in Chapter 2 of this accreditation framework. This means, among other things, that the programme must be intertwined with research and that a substantial number of the teachers must be active in research in the arts.

Advanced bachelor's and master's programmes

The admission requirements for advanced bachelor's and master's programmes differ from those that are in place for regular bachelor's and master's programmes. Apart from that, these programmes must fulfil the same quality requirements as other bachelor's and master's programmes.

Explanatory notes per chapter

Chapter 1: structure of the accreditation framework

The accreditation framework comprises criteria concerning contents along with criteria for the procedure followed and the report by the quality assessment agency. The criteria for assessing distinctive quality features of a programme are different in status from the other criteria because the conclusion about distinctive quality features does not influence the accreditation.

Chapter 2: accreditation of programmes based on a published external assessment report

Assessment framework

The assessment framework contains the criteria that the Accreditation Organisation uses to examine whether the programme fulfils the requirements for generic quality.

– *Re 2.1. Aims and objectives of the programme*

The level and orientation of the aims and objectives of the programme are examined in the light of the learning outcomes for professionally-oriented bachelor's programmes, academically-oriented bachelor's programmes and master's programmes as contained in Clause 58 of the Flemish Higher Education Act.

In addition, the aims and objectives are assessed in the light of subject-/discipline-specific requirements that are set by the relevant discipline concerned and/or by the professional practice or practice of the arts. For professionally-oriented bachelor's programmes, the learning outcomes must be assessed with the relevant professional field in the broadest sense, which may include the relevant social sector.

– *Re 2.2. Curriculum*

The programme's intended general and subject-/discipline-specific learning outcomes (the competences to be attained) must be specified explicitly in the curriculum. The proposed contents and design of the curriculum (including the attainment targets of the programme) must ensure that incoming students can achieve the intended learning outcomes within the set time. The aims and objectives of the programme are assessed through its contents. Professionally-oriented bachelor's programmes must accord to relevant developments in professional practice; academically-oriented bachelor's and master's programmes must accord to developments in the relevant research disciplines. Essential aspects in the assessment of academically-oriented programmes are the embedment of the programme in research and the development of competences in the area of research (including research in the arts). Academically-oriented master's programmes may aim at imparting competences for independent research or independent practice of the arts at the level of a newly-qualified researcher or artist, and/or at imparting profession-oriented competences for independent use of knowledge at the level of a newly-qualified professional. In the latter case, such programmes will have an additional professional orientation. Therefore, the requirements for bachelor's and master's programmes with an academic orientation include that where applicable the programme must have demonstrable ties with the actual practice of the relevant profession.

The structure of the curriculum is also subject to assessment. The focus is on the correspondence between the aims and objectives and the contents of the curriculum, the correspondence between the various components of the curriculum, the workload, the alignment with the needs of incoming students, the coherence of structure and contents, learning assessments (including test formats and the information provided to students about the

procedure and the forms of evaluation) and the organisation of the curriculum. With regard to the workload, the correspondence between actual and budgeted study time is also assessed. The standardisation applied in this framework must be seen in the light of the current statutory provisions. The standards included in the framework correspond to the questions posed in the current assessments by VLHORA and VLIR. They focus on assessing whether the curriculum contributes to the attainment of the aims and objectives. To this end, formulations are used that provide sufficient room for current developments concerning the standards.

The quality of the curriculum must also be apparent from its alignment with the qualifications of incoming students. In this respect the statutory and regulatory admission requirements are important. In addition to fulfilling the formal admission requirements, the programme will have to ensure that its curriculum is effectively geared to the average level of incoming students. In this respect, the quality of preparatory / bridging programmes and the admissions policy will also be assessed. With regard to curricula that are assessed as a model trajectory for achieving the aims and objectives of the programme, application of the Flemish Act on Flexible Pathways in Higher Education allows individualised trajectories for students, flexibility in learning environments, curricula and educational organisation, and the recognition of prior learning (competences and qualifications achieved elsewhere). When the occasion arises, these forms of flexibilisation, careers guidance and supervision regarding study progress are also taken into account in assessing the themes, standards and criteria involved.

– *Re 2.3. Staff commitment*

Regarding the criteria for the deployment of staff, it is important that the expertise of the staff employed in the programme⁸ is sufficiently in line with the level (bachelor's or master's) and the orientation (academic or professional) of the programme.

This means that in the case of programmes with a professional orientation, sufficient staff must be able to draw correspondences with professional practice. In the case of programmes with an academic orientation, a significant proportion of the staff deployed for the programme must be active in research and in addition, wherever relevant, sufficient staff must possess experience, knowledge and insight into the profession or artistic practice concerned and/or possess international expertise.

The first standard refers to the requirements for staff given the orientation of the programme (professional or academic). The third standard (quality of staff) refers to the necessity of the presence of a range of expertise depending on the aims and objectives of the programme and the educational organisation, and to the corresponding staff development policy.

The Flemish Higher Education Act does not explicitly mention the standard of quantity of staff under generic quality standards.⁹ It is included in the accreditation framework because the presence of sufficient staff is an obvious precondition for generic quality.

– *Re 2.4. Services*

The services must be sufficient to realise the curriculum. Services include facilities, tutoring and the provision of information to students. Tutoring must be provided throughout the length of the course. The provision of information to students and tutoring must be tailored to the requirements of the students. Future students must also be informed adequately about expectations regarding their competences.

The facilities include multimedia libraries, laboratories, equipment, study space or subject-specific databases. The nature and level of these facilities differ, depending on the character of the programme. During assessment, it is verified whether the facilities correspond with the generally prevalent level of quality for such facilities.

⁸ This not only includes staff associated with the institution providing the programme but, as the occasion arises, any persons contributing to the programme regardless of their position.

⁹ Dutch legislation also fails to explicitly mention this standard.

– *Ad 2.5. Internal quality assurance*

The institution must demonstrate that quality is structurally and permanently monitored and improved. The quality of its quality assurance offers the best guarantee that the programme is actively engaged in identifying weaknesses and taking measures to improve them. Thus, quality assurance is the best guarantee for maintaining and improving the quality established at accreditation, throughout the period for which the programme has been accredited.

Involvement, particularly of staff and students but also of alumni and the professional field, is a fundamental feature of internal quality assurance. This involvement should be evident from the method of consultation with all parties, their role in decision-making and how their recommendations are incorporated in the programme.

– *Ad 2.6. Results*

The ultimate question is whether the intended aims and objectives have been realised. This is determined by comparing the achieved learning outcomes with the intended learning outcomes for level, orientation and subject-/discipline-specific features. Comparing the achieved learning outcomes with the intended learning outcomes also comprises assessing whether the achieved learning outcomes of the graduates of the programme have sufficient social relevance, as mentioned in Clause 58 of the Flemish Higher Education Act. After all, the social relevance of the programme is expressed in the aims and objectives of the programme (in particular in the subject-/discipline-specific requirements). The success rates must also be acceptable. The stipulation contained in the Act (satisfactory success rates) has been operationalised in the standard for success rate by incorporating in the criteria that target figures must be formulated in comparison with relevant other programmes. When formulating the target figures, the requirements to be demanded of incoming students can also be taken into account, as well as the open access to higher education for most programmes and the programme's own profiling on distinctive features. The programme must indicate the success rate achieved in its self-evaluation in relation to the target figures quoted and the success rate of other relevant programmes.

Distinctive quality features

Besides accreditation, which is aimed at establishing the presence of sufficient generic quality standards, the Flemish Higher Education Act (Clause 59) also offers the possibility of commenting on distinctive features of the programme in the accreditation report. In this accreditation framework, the following criteria are included for that purpose:

- the distinctive feature must make a significant contribution to the differentiation and profiling within Flemish higher education, i.e., the distinctive feature must lead to greater diversity in the design of programmes;
- the distinctive feature must contribute to the overall quality of the programme, i.e., the programme concerned would not be as good without that specific feature (or without all the elements that make up this feature);
- the effects of the distinctive feature on the quality of education must be made operational, i.e., it must be clear what the consequences of the feature are for the aims and objectives, contents and design of the curriculum and services.

Prior to the assessment, the institution should apply for assessment of the distinctive feature by the quality assessment agency. The institution has to provide the relevant information about the standards of the distinctive feature on the basis of which the quality assessment agency can arrive at a conclusion.

Examples of distinctive features are a pronounced regional or international orientation, a specific bond with research, a distinctive educational concept or an extremely effective connection to the profession.

Assessment rules

The assessment panel gives a summarised assessment of the quality of the programme with a positive or negative overall conclusion concerning the presence of sufficient generic quality standards. The Accreditation Organisation has formulated assessment rules that describe the method by which the assessment panel gradually arrives at this final conclusion. For a positive final conclusion the programme must be rated “satisfactory” on all themes from the accreditation framework. The assessment panel must provide insight into its considerations at all levels – standards, themes and final conclusions – so that it will be clear how the final conclusion was reached and how the different standards were weighed.

The standards are assessed on the basis of a four-point scale: unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good and excellent. The descriptors “unsatisfactory” and “satisfactory” are the primary benchmark for the assessment. The rating “good” shows that the quality surpasses the generic quality. “Excellent” was included in the assessment scale as the rating that exposes “best practices”, which can have an exemplary function for other programmes.

Within a theme, individual standards can be rated as “unsatisfactory”. However, at the theme level, a programme must always earn the mark “satisfactory”. If certain standards are rated “unsatisfactory” but the overall theme is rated “satisfactory”, the assessment panel has to provide insight into its considerations in order to enable the Accreditation Organisation to follow and evaluate its decision.

Some programmes comprise various modes of study, such as specialisations, different locations, languages,.... Accreditation, however, takes place at the level of the entire programme rather than that of the individual modes of study. When a programme is rated as unsatisfactory because of a lack of quality in a particular mode of study, the institution concerned may exclude that mode of study from the accreditation application. Excluding a mode of study from the application for accreditation implies that it can no longer be offered once the programme has been accredited.

Assessment rules for accreditation

In its report, the quality assessment agency accounts for the procedure followed during external assessment. The Accreditation Organisation assesses the procedure on the basis of the report by the assessment panel and the assessment protocol of the quality assessment agency. Independence, expertise and authority of the assessment panel convened by the quality assessment agency are the essential factors. The expertise comprises knowledge of one's own discipline and the professional field concerned as well as expertise in the field of quality assessment and expertise of educational issues relating to higher education programmes. The Accreditation Organisation also assesses the procedure as regards the contribution of students, both during the assessment (has the panel interviewed students enrolled in the programme?) and in the composition of the assessment panel.

The assessment panel has to substantiate its conclusions on the basis of the reference framework used (which also includes the subject-/discipline-specific requirements) and its analysis of the facts. A comparison of the programme with other programmes, preferably international, must be part of the procedure.

If the Accreditation Organisation concludes that the external assessment has been conducted in a regular and conclusive manner, it takes a final decision on whether the programme offers sufficient quality guarantees.

In this respect, the Accreditation Organisation may, of course, endorse the external assessment. In this case, the external assessment constitutes the grounds for the accreditation decision.

However, the Accreditation Organisation may also partly or completely disagree with the external assessment report. In that case, the accreditation decision must be based on the assessment rules in place for assessment panels (see Chapter 4). The Accreditation Organisation shall then explicitly give grounds for its decision in the accreditation report.

Explanatory notes to the system of accreditation by virtue of law

For the purpose of introducing the accreditation system, the possibility of accreditation by virtue of law has been laid down by decree. The duration of accreditation by virtue of law depends on the publication date of the last assessment report. Programmes whose assessment report was published between 1 January 1998 and 31 December 2004 are deemed to have been accredited up until the end of the academic year beginning in the eighth calendar year following the year in which the assessment report was published. Programmes whose external assessment was published after 1 January 2005 are deemed to have been accredited up until the end of the academic year beginning in the year following that in which the assessment report was published. In any case, all accreditations by virtue of law will expire by the end of the 2012/13 academic year.

Postgraduate programmes converted into bachelor's or master's programmes will be accredited by virtue of law for a period of four years, with the exception of postgraduate programmes that have been converted into initial bachelor's or master's programmes through amalgamation with an undergraduate programme. In the latter case, the arrangement for converted initial bachelor's or master's programmes applies. The period of four years for accreditation by virtue of law also applies to bachelor's and master's programmes ensuing from the conversion of adult education centre departments taken over by university colleges.

The Flemish government may adapt the duration of the accreditation by virtue of law or the timeframes for application for converted programmes originating from (components of) several original programmes or in order to allow for the joint assessment of programmes.

For programmes whose assessment report was published after 1 January 2005, the external assessment must be based on the criteria laid down in this accreditation framework.

For the new bachelor's and master's programmes, external assessment for the purpose of accreditation will only be used to a limited extent in the years ahead. The assessment reports on which the accreditation decisions are based will mainly reflect the external assessment of the quality of existing programmes, followed by that of the bachelor's and master's programmes under construction and the "old" programmes that are being phased out. The converted bachelor's and master's programmes will not be reviewed until the end of the transition period. This procedure has been set up in order to avoid having to conduct an excessive number of assessments at the same time, i.e., once the bachelor's and master's programmes have been fully developed.

**Appendix 1.
Interpretation of accreditation criteria in transition period for programmes with an academic orientation that ensue from the conversion of university college programmes (pertaining to embedment in research)**

Themes, standards, criteria	Specific assessment of designated elements until 2008	Specific assessment of designated elements after 2008	Specific information
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<p>Theme: 1. Aims and objectives</p> <p>Standard: 1.1 . Level and orientation: bachelor's programmes, professional orientation</p> <p>Criteria: The aims and objectives of the programme are focused on having the students master:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • general competences such as the capacity for logical thought and reasoning, the ability to acquire and process information, the ability for critical reflection and project-based work, creativity, the ability to perform simple supervision tasks, the ability to communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialists as well as laymen, and a positive attitude towards life-long learning; • general professional competences such as the ability to work together as part of a team, a solution-oriented attitude in the sense of being able to define and analyse independently complex problematic situations in professional practice, and the ability to develop and apply effective strategies to resolve them, and to develop a sense of social responsibility in connection with the professional practice; • specific professional competences at the level of a newly-qualified professional. 	<p>not applicable in this issue</p>	<p>not applicable in this issue</p>	
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Themes, standards, criteria	Specific assessment of designated elements until 2008	Specific assessment of designated elements after 2008	Specific information
<p>Standard: 1.2. Level and orientation: bachelor's programmes, academic orientation</p> <p>Criteria: The aims and objectives of the programme are focused on having the students master:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • general competences such as the capacity for logical thought and reasoning, the ability to acquire and process information, the capacity for critical reflection, creativity, being able to perform simple management tasks, the ability to communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions both to specialists and laymen and a positive attitude towards life-long learning; • general <i>academic competences such as a research attitude, knowledge of research methodologies and techniques and the ability to apply them adequately</i>, the ability to collect relevant data in order to <i>form an opinion</i> about social, academic, scientific and ethical issues, an appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge, and the <i>ability to initiate problem-driven research</i>; • an understanding of <i>basic academic, discipline-related knowledge</i> inherent to a certain domain of the sciences or the arts, systematic understanding of the key elements of a discipline which includes acquiring coherent and detailed <i>knowledge that is inspired partly by the most recent developments in the discipline</i>, and an understanding of the structure of the discipline and its inter-relatedness with other disciplines. 	<p>From 2004/05 or 2005/06: With regard to academic/scientific support and intertwining of education and research, the long-term aims and objectives of the programme relating to the intended competences of graduates correspond to general aims and objectives of bachelor's programmes with an academic orientation outlined in the draft accreditation framework for existing programmes, including with respect to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - expertise and application of research methodologies and techniques - research attitude - formation of opinions - skills related to the academic/scientific discipline <p>The short-term aims and objectives must evolve in a progressive manner in order to make a reasonable case that the long-term aims and objectives will be achieved by 2013.</p>	<p>From 2008/09 As in the preceding column</p>	<p>Description of short-term and long-term aims and objectives of the programme</p>

Themes, standards, criteria	Specific assessment of designated elements until 2008	Specific assessment of designated elements after 2008	Specific information
<p>Standard: 1.3. Level and orientation, master's programmes Criteria: The aims and objectives of the programme are focused on having the students master:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • general competences at an advanced level such as the <i>ability to reason and act in an academic manner</i>, the ability to handle complex problems, the ability to reflect on one's own thoughts and work, and the ability to convert this reflection into the development of more effective solutions, the <i>ability to communicate one's own research</i> and solutions to peers and laymen, and the <i>ability to develop an opinion in an uncertain context</i>; • general academic competences at an advanced level such as the <i>ability to apply research methods and techniques</i>, the <i>ability to design research</i>, the <i>ability to apply paradigms</i> in the domain of the sciences or the arts and the ability to indicate the limits of paradigms, the <i>ability to be original and creative with a view to continuously expanding knowledge</i> and insight, and the ability to collaborate in a multi-disciplinary environment; • advanced understanding of and insight into <i>scientific, discipline-specific knowledge</i> inherent to a certain domain of the sciences or the arts, <i>insight into the most recent knowledge in the subject/discipline or parts thereof</i>, the ability to follow and interpret the direction in which theory formation is developing, the <i>ability to make an original contribution towards the body of knowledge</i> of one or several parts of the subject/discipline, and display specific competences characteristic to the subject/discipline such as <i>designing, researching, analysing and diagnosing</i>; • the competences needed for either <i>independent research</i> or the independent practice of the arts at the level of a newly-qualified researcher or artist, or the general and specific professional competences needed for <i>independent application of academic or artistic knowledge</i> at the level of a newly-qualified professional. 	<p>From 2004/05 or 2005/06: The long-term aims and objectives of the programme relating to the intended competences of graduates have at least been outlined and correspond to the general aims and objectives for master's programmes in the draft accreditation framework for existing programmes, including with respect to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - use of research methodologies and techniques - design of research - use of paradigms - formation of opinions - skills related to the academic/scientific discipline <p>The short-term aims and objectives must evolve in a progressive manner in order to make a reasonable case that the long-term aims and objectives will be achieved by 2013.</p>	<p>From 2007/08 or 2008/09: The long-term aims and objectives of the programme relating to the intended competences of graduates have been elaborated in full and correspond to the general aims and objectives for master's programmes in the draft accreditation framework for existing programmes.</p> <p>The short-term aims and objectives must evolve in a progressive manner in order to make a reasonable case that the long-term aims and objectives will be achieved by 2013.</p>	<p>Description of short-term and long-term aims and objectives of the programme</p>

Themes, standards, criteria	Specific assessment of designated elements until 2008	Specific assessment of designated elements after 2008	Specific information
<p>Standard: 1.4. Subject-/discipline-specific requirements Criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The aims and objectives of the programme (expressed in the learning outcomes of the students) correspond with the requirements set by professional colleagues, both nationally and internationally, and the relevant professional field for a programme in the domain concerned (subject/discipline and/or professional practice or practice of the arts). In the case of regulated professions, the requirements correspond with the regulation or legislation concerned. • The <i>learning outcomes</i> of bachelor and master's programmes with an academic orientation <i>stem from requirements set by the academic and/or artistic discipline, international academic practice</i> and, for programmes to which this applies, the practice in the relevant professional field. 	<p>From 2004/05 or 2005/06 (bachelor's programmes, academic orientation) and 2007/08 or 2008/09 (master's programmes) respectively: The long-term aims and objectives of the programme relating to the embedment in research correspond to the requirements set by national and international peers.</p> <p>The short-term aims and objectives must evolve in a progressive manner in order to make a reasonable case that the long-term aims and objectives will be achieved by 2013 at the latest.</p>	<p>As in the preceding column</p> <p>The short-term aims and objectives must evolve in a progressive manner in order to make a reasonable case that the long-term aims and objectives will be achieved by 2013 at the latest.</p>	<p>Description of short-term and long-term aims and objectives of the programme</p>

Themes, standards, criteria	Specific assessment of designated elements until 2008	Specific assessment of designated elements after 2008	Specific information
<p>Theme: 2. Curriculum</p> <p>Standard: 2.1. Requirements for professional and academic orientation Criteria: Bachelor's programmes with academic orientation and master's programmes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Students develop their knowledge through the interaction between education and research</i> (including research in the arts) within relevant disciplines; • The curriculum corresponds with current developments in the relevant academic or scientific discipline(s) through <i>verifiable links with current academic or scientific theories</i>; • The curriculum ensures the development of <i>competences in the field of research</i> and/or the development and practice of the arts; • Where appropriate, the curriculum has verifiable links with the current relevant professional practice. <p>Standard: 2.2. Correspondence between the aims / objectives and the curriculum Criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The curriculum is an adequate realisation of the intended learning outcomes of the programme with regard to the level, <i>orientation</i> and subject-/discipline-specific requirements. • The intended learning outcomes are properly reflected in the educational goals of the curriculum or parts thereof. • The contents of the curriculum enable students to achieve the intended learning outcomes. 	<p>From 2004/05 or 2005/06 (bachelor's programmes, academic orientation) and no later than 2007/08 or 2008/09 (master's programmes) respectively: The long-term description of the curriculum shows sufficient:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. interaction with research (including submitting research themes, feedback regarding research issues and results in education, involving students in research) b. connection with current academic/scientific theories from the disciplines involved c. development of skills relating to research <p>The curriculum must evolve in a progressive manner in order to fulfil the requirements by 2013.</p> <p>From 2004/05 or 2005/06 (bachelor's programmes, academic orientation) (and no later than from 2007/08 or 2008/09 (master's programmes, academic orientation)): the long-term curriculum described is increasingly being realised; the short-term realisation of the curriculum makes it likely that by 2013 the curriculum will fully comply with the requirements laid down in the accreditation framework with respect to the intertwining with research.</p>	<p>See up to 2008</p> <p>In addition: From 2008/09 or 2009/10 (master's programmes): The curriculum described is increasingly being realised – the degree of realisation of the curriculum makes it likely that by 2013 the curriculum will fully comply with the requirements laid down in the accreditation framework with respect to the intertwining with research.</p> <p>The curriculum must evolve in a progressive manner in order to fulfil the requirements by 2013.</p> <p>As above</p>	<p>Short-term and long-term description of the curriculum</p> <p>Short-term and long-term description of the curriculum</p>

Themes, standards, criteria	Specific assessment of designated elements until 2008	Specific assessment of designated elements after 2008	Specific information
<p>Standard: 2.3. Consistency of the curriculum Criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students follow a curriculum that is coherent in terms of content. </p> <p>Standard: 2.4. Workload Criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The actual duration of the programme is assessed and corresponds with the statutory standards. The intended learning outcomes are attainable because factors relating to the curriculum that could hamper study progress are eliminated wherever possible. </p> <p>Standard: 2.5. Admission requirements Criteria: The structure and contents of the curriculum are in line with the qualifications of the incoming students:</p> <p>Bachelor's programmes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secondary school leaving certificate, <i>Diploma van het Hoger Onderwijs van het korte type met volledig leerplan</i>, <i>Diploma van het Hoger Onderwijs voor Sociale Promotie</i> or a diploma or certificate that is recognised as equivalent in accordance with a law, decree, European directive or other international agreement ; Predefined conditions set by the institution for individuals who do not meet the above-mentioned requirements. </p> <p>Master's programmes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A bachelor's degree, with a qualification or qualifications specified in more detail by the management of the institution, possibly supplemented with an individualised curriculum, a preparatory programme or a bridging programme. </p> <p>Advanced master's programme: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A master's degree, with a qualification or qualifications specified in more detail by the management of the institution, possibly supplemented with either an assessment concerning the fitness or capacity of the individual, or a preparatory programme. </p>			

Themes, standards, criteria	Specific assessment of designated elements until 2008	Specific assessment of designated elements after 2008	Specific information
<p>Standard: 2.6. Credits Criteria: The curriculum meets the legal requirements regarding the association of credits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bachelor's degree: at least 180 credits • Master's degree: at least 60 credits • Advanced master's degree: at least 60 credits <p>Standard: 2.7. Coherence of structure and contents Criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The educational concept is in line with the aims and objectives. • The study methods correspond with this educational concept. <p>Standard: 2.8. Learning assessment Criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By means of evaluations, tests and examinations, the students are assessed in an adequate manner which is insightful to them to determine whether they have achieved the intended learning outcomes of the programme or parts thereof. <p>Standard: 2.9. Master's thesis: Criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The master's programme is concluded with the master's thesis whereby the student demonstrates the <i>ability for analytic and synthetic reasoning, independent problem solving</i> at an academic level or artistic creation. The <i>work reflects the general critical-reflective attitude or the research attitude of the student.</i> • The master's thesis corresponds to at least a fifth of the total number of credits with a minimum of 15 and a maximum of 30 credits. 	<p>The long-term draft of the master's thesis is in line with the statutory provisions, including with respect to the substantial academic/scientific foundation.</p> <p>The short-term draft must evolve in a progressive manner in order to make a reasonable case that the requirements will be fulfilled by 2013 at the latest.</p>	<p>(Depending on the first implementation of the master's programmes, from 2008/09 or 2009/10):</p> <p>The long-term draft of the master's thesis is in line with the statutory provisions, including with respect to the substantial academic/scientific foundation.</p> <p>The short-term draft and its realisation must evolve in a progressive manner in order to fulfil the requirements by 2013 at the latest.</p>	<p>Short-term and long-term description of the curriculum</p>

Themes, standards, criteria	Specific assessment of designated elements until 2008	Specific assessment of designated elements after 2008	Specific information
<p>Theme: 3. Staff commitment</p> <p>Standard: 3.1. Requirements for professional / academic orientation Criteria: The programme meets the following criteria for the deployment of staff for a programme with a professional or an academic orientation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Teaching is principally provided by researchers</i> who contribute to the development of the subject/discipline (including research in the arts). • In addition, and where appropriate, sufficient staff will be deployed with knowledge of and insight in the professional field or practice of the arts concerned. <p>Standard: 3.2. Quantity of staff Criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sufficient staff are deployed to realise the intended quality of the programme. </p> <p>Standard: 3.3. Quality of staff Criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The staff deployed are sufficiently qualified to ensure that the aims and objectives of the programme, in terms of content, didactics and organisation, are achieved. </p>	<p>It is likely that by 2013 a significant proportion of the teaching will be provided by staff that are actively engaged in research and thus contribute to the development of their discipline, based on the actual achievement and the intentions with respect to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. staff policy and recruitment policy b. the research tasks and the qualifications of the workforce (including the extent to which a substantial research task has been incorporated into vacancies for new staff, increase in number of PhD students, increase in number of PhDs, increase in research staff vis-à-vis overall staff) c. deployment of active researchers, if any, from partners within and outside the Association in education d. the scope of the research in which programme staff participates 	<p>As in the preceding column. The initial achievement is already manifest.</p>	<p>Staff policy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - recruitment policy - measures for boosting the research qualifications of staff <p>Description of workforce</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - research workload of staff (number of FTEs and ratio vis-à-vis total workload), with breakdown by new staff members and doctoral mandates - multi-year plans <p>Description of research policy (structures, organisation, strategy)</p> <p>Research projects in which programme staff participate (including doctoral mandates)</p> <p>Qualifications of staff (in FTEs):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - doctorate - research experience - current research activities <p>Deployment of academic staff from partners:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - within Association - outside Association

Themes, standards, criteria	Specific assessment of designated elements until 2008	Specific assessment of designated elements after 2008	Specific information
<p>Theme: 4. Services</p> <p>Standard: 4.1. Facilities Criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Housing and facilities are sufficient for the realisation of the curriculum. </p> <p>Standard: 4.2. Tutoring Criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tutoring and the provision of information to students are adequate in view of study progress. Tutoring and information provision are geared to students' needs. </p>	<p>Based on the actual achievement and the intentions, it is likely that the quality and quantity of the research facilities (infrastructure, equipment, academic/scientific databases, etc.) that are essential to guarantee the embedment of education in research will be sufficient by 2013 at the latest.</p>	<p>As in the preceding column</p>	<p>Research facilities (achievement and planning in institution and through collaboration within and outside Association), related to embedding education in research</p> <p>Use of funds earmarked for the embedment of programmes in research and other financial resources for research and embedding education in research</p>

Themes, standards, criteria	Specific assessment of designated elements until 2008	Specific assessment of designated elements after 2008	Specific information
<p>Theme: 5. Internal quality assurance</p> <p>Standard: 5.1. Evaluation of results Criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The curriculum is periodically evaluated in the light of verifiable objectives and other measures. </p> <p>Standard: 5.2. Measures for improvement Criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The outcomes of the evaluation form the basis for verifiable measures for improvement that contribute to the achievement of the objectives. </p> <p>Standard: 5.3. Involvement of staff, students, alumni and the professional field Criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff, students, alumni and the relevant professional field are actively involved in the internal quality assurance system. </p>			

Themes, standards, criteria	Specific assessment of designated elements until 2008	Specific assessment of designated elements after 2008	Specific information
<p>Theme: 6. Results</p> <p>Standard: 6.1. Achieved learning outcomes Criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The achieved learning outcomes correspond with the aims and objectives regarding level, orientation and subject-/discipline-specific requirements. </p> <p>Standard: 6.2. Success rate Criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Target figures regarding success rate have been formulated on the basis of a comparison with relevant other programmes. The programme's success rate is in line with these target figures. </p>			

Assessment framework for the initial accreditation of higher education programmes in Flanders

1 September 2009

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1 Structure of the assessment framework

The assessment framework for the initial accreditation of higher education programmes comprises:

- a framework for the evaluation of themes, standards and criteria
- assessment rules
- a description of the initial accreditation procedure, including the criteria for the evaluation of the assessment and the initial accreditation report.

The decision regarding the accreditation of new programmes is founded on an assessment based on six *themes*.¹

These themes are:

- aims and objectives of the programme
- curriculum
- staff commitment
- services and facilities
- internal quality assurance
- conditions for continuity.

The above themes are reviewed on the basis of *standards* and the corresponding *criteria* (see chapter 2).

Assessment rules have been laid down for initial accreditations (see chapter 3).

The Accreditation Organisation bases its judgement regarding the new programme on an assessment carried out or commissioned by the accreditation organisation. This assessment will result in an initial accreditation report. Criteria have been drawn up regarding the quality of the initial accreditation report (see chapter 4 on the *Initial accreditation procedure*).²

The method of working and procedure to be followed in initial accreditations have been laid down by the accreditation organisation. The organisation has opted for a differentiated approach. Although all new programmes have to meet the same criteria, the nature of the assessment to be carried out may vary depending on the degree of newness of the programme in the institution involved and in the Flemish higher education sector, and depending on the extent to which the programme is already offered.³

¹ Article 58 of the Flemish Higher Education Act uses the concept of “generic quality standards” in this respect. The explanatory notes to this assessment framework clarify the relationship between the generic quality standards from the Higher Education Act and the themes and standards in the assessment framework.

² The assessment framework briefly touches upon the basics of several relevant provisions in the Higher Education Act. Please refer to the Higher Education Act for the full wording of these provisions.

³ The procedure for processing applications is outlined in the Guidelines for Initial Accreditations in the Flemish Community, drawn up by NVAO.

2 Evaluation framework

2.1 Aims and objectives of the programme

Standards	Criteria
Level and orientation: bachelor's, professional higher education	<p>The programme aims and objectives are aimed at leading the students to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• master general competencies such as thinking and reasoning skills, retrieving and processing information, critical reflection and the ability to work in a project context, creativity, the ability to perform simple management duties, the ability to communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions both to specialists and laymen and an attitude conducive to lifelong learning;• master general professional competencies such as the ability to work in a team, the ability to work in a solution-oriented fashion in the sense of autonomously defining and analysing complex problem situations in professional practice and being able to develop and apply meaningful solution strategies and an awareness of the social responsibility that ensues from professional practice;• master profession-specific competencies at the level of a newly qualified professional.
Level and orientation: bachelor's, academic education	<p>The programme aims and objectives are aimed at leading the students to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• master general competencies such as thinking and reasoning skills, retrieving and processing information, critical reflection, creativity, the ability to perform simple management duties, the ability to communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialists and laymen and an attitude conducive to lifelong learning;• master general academic competencies such as an investigative attitude, knowledge of and the ability to use research methods and techniques in an adequate fashion, the ability to collect the data relevant to the formation of a judgement on social, academic and ethical issues, an appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and boundaries of knowledge and the skills required for a problem-based initiation of research;• gain an understanding of the academic basic knowledge specific to a particular domain of science or the arts, a systematic knowledge of the core elements of a discipline, including the acquisition of coherent and detailed knowledge in part inspired by the latest developments in the discipline and an understanding of the structure of the field of study and its relationship with other fields of study.

Level and orientation: master's	<p>The programme aims and objectives are aimed at leading the students to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • master general competencies at an advanced level, such as the ability to think and act in an academic fashion, the ability to deal with complex problems, the ability to reflect on their own thinking and working and being able to translate that reflection into the development of more adequate solutions, the ability to communicate their own research and problem solutions to peers and laymen and the ability to form a judgement in an uncertain context; • master general academic competencies at an advanced level, such as the ability to use research methods and techniques, the ability to design research, the ability to use paradigms in the domain of science or the arts and being able to identify the boundaries of paradigms, the ability to demonstrate originality and creativity with a view to the continuous expansion of knowledge and insights and the ability to work in concert in a multi-disciplinary environment; • an advanced understanding of and insight into the academic knowledge specific to a particular domain of science or the arts, insight into the latest knowledge of the field of study or components thereof, the ability to follow and interpret developments in the formation of theories, the ability to make an original contribution to the knowledge relevant to one or more components of the field of study and the possession of specific skills related to the field of study, such as designing, researching, analysing and diagnosing; • either master the competencies required to independently conduct research or independently practise art at the level of a newly-qualified researcher or artist; or master the general and specific professional competencies required to independently apply academic or artistic knowledge at the level of a newly-qualified professional.
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Domain-specific requirements	<p>The aims and objectives of the programme (expressed in learning outcomes) correspond to the requirements set for a programme in the relevant domain (field of study / discipline and/or professional practice or art practice) by (foreign) peers and the relevant professional field. For regulated professions, such aims and objectives are in keeping with the relevant rules and regulations.</p> <p>The learning outcomes of bachelor's programmes with a professional orientation have been reviewed by the relevant professional field.</p> <p>For bachelor's programmes and master's programmes with an academic orientation, the learning outcomes have been derived from the requirements set by the academic and/or artistic discipline, the international world of science and, when appropriate, actual practice in the relevant professional field.</p>
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2.2 Curriculum

Standards	Criteria
Requirements regarding	The curriculum is geared to the following criteria regarding a professional or academic orientation:

professional and academic orientation	<p>Bachelor's programmes (professional orientation):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students develop knowledge through specialised literature, learning materials derived from the professional or arts practice and interaction with professional practice, arts practice and/or (applied) research; • The curriculum has demonstrable links with current developments in the field of study / discipline; • The curriculum safeguards the development of professional or artistic skills and has demonstrable links with current professional practice; <p>Bachelor's programmes and master's programmes (academic orientation):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students develop knowledge through the interaction between education and research (including research in the arts) within relevant disciplines; • The curriculum ties in with developments in the relevant academic discipline(s) by demonstrable links with current academic theories; • The curriculum safeguards the development of skills in the field of research and/or the development and practice of the arts; • When appropriate, the curriculum has demonstrable links with the current practice of relevant professions.
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Correspondence between aims and objectives and curriculum	<p>The curriculum, the teaching concept, the teaching methods and the test formats reflect the learning outcomes to be attained by the students.</p> <p>The learning outcomes to be attained have demonstrably been translated into learning aims and objectives for (components of) the curriculum.</p>
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Cohesion in curriculum	The contents of the curriculum are coherent.
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Duration	The course duration is in keeping with the statutory standards.
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Admission requirements	The form and content of the curriculum are geared to the qualifications of incoming students. ⁴
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Bachelor's programmes:

- secondary education qualifications, certificate of short higher education courses with full curriculum, certificate of higher education programmes aimed at social promotion or a diploma or certificate recognised as equivalent under a law, decree, European directive or other international agreement;
- conditions determined by the board of the institution for applicants that do not meet the above conditions.

Advanced bachelor's programmes:

- bachelor's degree, with (a) particular qualification(s) determined by the board of the institution, possibly supplemented by a study into the candidate's aptitude or competence or a preparatory curriculum.

⁴ The admission requirements outlined are those laid down in the Higher Education Act. With effect from 2005-2006, the requirements for admission to higher education have been regulated by the Flexibilisation Act. In terms of content, these admission requirements are identical to the ones listed here.

Master's programmes:

- bachelor's degree, with (a) particular qualification(s) determined by the board of the institution and, when appropriate, supplemented by an individualised curriculum, a preparatory curriculum or bridging curriculum.

Advanced master's programmes:

- master's degree, with (a) particular qualification(s) determined by the board of the institution, possibly supplemented by a study into the candidate's aptitude or competence or a preparatory curriculum.

Number of credits	The programme meets formal requirements regarding the number of credits: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bachelor's programmes: a minimum of 180 credits • Advanced bachelor's programmes: a minimum of 60 credits • Master's programmes: a minimum of 60 credits • Advanced master's programmes: a minimum of 60 credits
Master's thesis	Master's programmes are rounded off with a master's thesis. This carries at least one fifth of the total number of credits, with a minimum of 15 and a maximum of 30 credits.

2.3 Staff commitment

Standards	Criteria
Requirements regarding professional / academic orientation	<p>The programme is in keeping with the following criteria for the staff commitment for programmes with a professional or academic orientation:</p> <p>Programmes with a professional orientation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A major part of the curriculum will be taught by staff who establish a link between the programme and professional or arts practice. <p>Programmes with an academic orientation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A major part of the curriculum will be taught by staff who contribute to the development of the field of study (including research in the arts). • In addition, when appropriate, the programme will have sufficient staff with knowledge of and insight into relevant professional or arts practice.
Quantity of staff	<p>The capacity made available is sufficient to launch the new programme.</p> <p>The capacity made available is sufficient to continue the new programme.</p>
Quality of staff	The staff that will be asked to implement the programme are qualified for the substantive, educational and organisational realisation of the curriculum.

2.4 Facilities

Standards	Criteria
Material facilities	The proposed accommodation and material facilities are sufficient to realise the curriculum.
Tutoring	The staff capacity arranged for tutoring and information provision to students is sufficient to safeguard their progress.

2.5 Internal quality assurance

Standards	Criteria
Systematic approach	An internal quality assurance system is in place, involving measures for improvement taken on the basis of testable targets and periodical evaluations.
Involving staff, students, alumni and the professional field	Staff, students, alumni and the relevant professional field will be actively involved in the programme's internal quality assurance.

2.6 Conditions for continuity

Standards	Criteria
Graduation guarantee	The institution provides its students with the guarantee that they can complete the curriculum in its entirety.
Investments	The investments envisaged are sufficient to establish the programme (including the facilities).
Financial facilities	The financial facilities are sufficient to be able to offer the full course of the programme.

3 Assessment rules

The proposal for a new programme is assessed by the accreditation organisation. This assessment determines whether the new programme provides potentially sufficient generic quality standards. Each of the standards is evaluated with either a satisfactory or an unsatisfactory result. For a positive assessment, each theme in the assessment framework must score a satisfactory. The individual theme scores are determined by weighing the conclusions regarding the various standards in the theme under consideration. Transparency is provided with respect to the manner in which the assessment of the various standards has resulted in the summarising conclusion on a theme, in other words, how – given the criteria in this assessment framework – the organisation arrived at its conclusion for each theme on the basis of the analysis of each standard.

In its final conclusion regarding the new programme, the accreditation organisation will indicate how this conclusion is based on the facts, the analysis of these facts and the assessment of the programme based on this assessment framework.

The essence of these assessment rules has been laid down in the regulations pertaining to “the determination of administrative principles that bear on the decision-making regarding the accreditation and initial accreditation of programmes provided in the Flemish Community”. Articles 7 and 8 of these regulations read:

“Art. 7. An accreditation decision or initial accreditation report, as the case may be, is positive if all summarising conclusions on the themes listed in the Accreditation Framework or the Assessment Framework, as the case may be, are satisfactory. If, at the discretion of NVAO, standards judged as “unsatisfactory” are compensated by strengths within other standards under that same theme, a theme will be judged as “satisfactory”.

Art. 8. In the event of programmes comprising various specialisations and/or locations, a theme can only score a “satisfactory” if each of the various specialisations and/or locations is judged as “satisfactory”.

4 Initial accreditation procedure

1. The points of departure for the assessment are the Flemish Higher Education Act, the above regulations and the themes, standards, criteria and assessment rules laid down in this assessment framework.
2. For each new programme, the institution draws up documents that portray the proposed new programme and demonstrate that the programme meets the statutory requirements. In addition, the institution will provide the following information:
 - a description of the programme on the basis of the themes and standards of the assessment framework;
 - a financial overview stating the expenditure relating to the realisation of the programme;
 - a description of the required staff, stating numbers and qualifications.
3. The institution submits an application for initial accreditation to the accreditation organisation, enclosing the information listed under 2. The format and content of the application dossier must conform to the regulations laid down by the accreditation organisation. For programmes provided by statutory registered institutions⁵, this application can only be submitted after a positive judgement by the Recognition Committee regarding the macro efficiency of the programme or a positive judgement to that effect by the Flemish government; a judgement of the Flemish government is deemed positive if not communicated within thirty calendar days. The application must be submitted within a term of fifteen days after receipt of the judgement referred to above or after expiry of the period of time within which the Flemish government is to pass its judgement.

The application must state the name of the institution and, if appropriate, the association it belongs to. In addition, the application must indicate:

- the name of the programme;
 - the field of study or the (components of) fields of study;
 - whether the programme already exists within the Flemish higher education system or
 - whether this is a programme that is new to the higher education system in Flanders;
 - whether the proposed programme trains students for a bachelor's degree with a professional orientation, a bachelor's degree with an academic orientation, a master's degree, an advanced bachelor's degree or an advanced master's degree;
 - which specialisations the new programme comprises;
 - whether the programme is to be provided at one or more locations.
4. On the basis of the data listed under 3 and the initial accreditation procedure it has laid down, the accreditation organisation decides the scope of the assessment, the procedure to be followed and the expertise to be commanded by the designated external experts.
 5. The actual assessment is conducted by an external panel of experts commissioned by the accreditation organisation. They will lay down their findings in an advisory report, in accordance with the regulations pertaining to the initial accreditation methodology.

⁵ Article 7 of the Flemish Higher Education Act defines statutory registered institutions as: the university colleges, the universities, the institutions providing post-graduate programmes and the recognised faculties for Protestant theology.

6. In their assessment, the panel experts determine whether the plans and documents meet the criteria laid down in this assessment framework. The assessment results in a summarising conclusion regarding the new programme, which is motivated in an initial accreditation report.
7. On the basis of the advisory report, the accreditation organisation draws up its initial accreditation report, which contains a summarising conclusion. This initial accreditation report must meet the following criteria:
 - a. The quality score awarded in the assessment is – insofar as relevant – also based on a comparison with other, similar programmes and internationally accepted criteria for programmes in the domain under consideration.
 - b. The initial accreditation report indicates whether or not the new programme potentially provides sufficient generic quality standards. The report must discuss at least the six themes listed in this assessment framework, devoting attention to all the standards under each theme. For each standard, a satisfactory or unsatisfactory valuation is awarded, which serves as the basis for the conclusion given for each theme. The conclusions are underpinned by facts and analyses wherever possible. The report is finalised with a summarising conclusion regarding the new programme.
 - c. The initial accreditation report describes the procedure followed in the assessment. It explicitly explains:
 - the methods used;
 - the sources of information used;
 - the reference framework used in the assessment.

The accreditation organisation draws up its initial accreditation report and summarising conclusion on the basis of the advisory report, once it has ascertained that the advisory report meets the three criteria referred to above and that the methods, sources of information and reference framework used are reliable.

8. The accreditation organisation will make a decision within four months after receipt of the application. The decision is laid down in an initial accreditation report. Before the timeframe of four months expires and before finalising the initial accreditation report, the accreditation organisation allows the board of the institution a term of ten days to formulate appeals and comments regarding the draft initial accreditation report. If the accreditation organisation deems that the generic quality standards provided for the new programme are potentially sufficient, the assessment results in a positive initial accreditation report.

The accreditation organisation forwards its initial accreditation report to the institution and the Flemish minister responsible for education.

Explanatory notes

General

New programmes

A new programme is a programme that does not ensue from an accepted transformation of the existing programmes on offer and that is not registered to the institution involved on the Higher Education Register. Two types of new programme can be distinguished: programmes that are entirely new to the Flemish higher education system and that are not

yet listed on the Higher Education Register and programmes that are new to the institution involved but nonetheless registered on the Higher Education Register.

The Flemish government decides on the recognition of new programmes. To that end, the programmes must meet the conditions stated in Articles 61 and 62 of the Higher Education Act, such as passing the initial accreditation by the accreditation organisation and a positive judgement from the Recognition Committee or the Flemish government with respect to the macro efficiency of the programme. The initial accreditation determines whether the generic quality standards are potentially represented to a sufficient degree in the new programme.

A newly recognised programme is deemed to have been accredited up to and including the end of the second academic year in which the first cohort of students completed the full study load laid down for the new programme.

Subject to assessment by the accreditation organisation

One of the tasks of the accreditation organisation is to assess whether applications for new programmes demonstrate sufficient potential for generic quality standards. This assessment also answers the question of whether the programme meets the necessary conditions for launching a new programme and whether the institution is capable of providing the new programme in a sustainable manner.

A positive initial accreditation decision from the accreditation organisation is one of the conditions to be met in order to be able to offer a new programme. With a view to the commensurable legal effects – the authorisation to offer a recognised programme – the themes, standards and criteria observed in initial accreditations must in essence correspond to those used in the accreditation of existing programmes. At the standards and criteria level, however, the accreditation of existing programmes differs from initial accreditations. Unlike the assessment of existing programmes, the assessment of new programmes involves an assessment based on a plan. The question is whether the proposal is underpinned by clear aims and objectives that tie in with the various requirements set for bachelor's programmes with a professional orientation, those for bachelor's and master's programmes with an academic orientation and the subject-specific requirements. In addition, the plan must comprise a description of the curriculum and the facilities that justifies the expectation that the aims and objectives will be achieved. In order to be able to assess these themes, high requirements are set for the quality of the information to be provided by the institutions (burden of proof principle). The accreditation organisation calls in external experts for the assessment.

A key point of departure in the assessment of new programmes is that the scope of the external assessment may depend on the extent to which a proposed new programme differs from already existing programmes, on the degree of newness of the programme to the institution or to Flanders, and on the elements that are already in place (already existing programme components, staff, infrastructure, financial resources) for the realisation of the new programme. Applications that differ substantially from existing programmes in terms of content will be subjected to a more extensive assessment than applications for programmes that are already offered elsewhere in the Flemish higher education system. Thus, the assessments may differ as regards depth of investigation. For each application, the actual set-up of the assessment procedure is determined on the basis of the procedure regulations laid down.

The assessment pertains to the expected quality of the programme.

If a new programme involves various specialisations or locations, the assessment must demonstrate that the generic quality is safeguarded for the entire programme with all its specialisations and at all its locations.

Transparency

The accreditation organisation regards it as its duty to contribute to the transparency of the programmes on offer. This means that it will ascertain whether each proposed new programme is sailing under true colours, i.e., whether the aims and objectives and the curriculum are in keeping with the proposed nomenclature. For proposed new programmes whose nomenclature is already listed on the Higher Education Register, it will ascertain whether the aims and objectives and the curriculum sufficiently correspond to existing programmes registered on the Higher Education Register under that same nomenclature, in order to justify the nomenclature under consideration for that programme. With regard to new programmes that are not yet offered elsewhere in Flanders under that nomenclature and must therefore be regarded as truly new in terms of content, the institution will have to satisfy the accreditation organisation that the proposed programme differs substantially from existing programmes and consequently must not be regarded as a variation of such programmes.

Assessment framework

This assessment framework is based on the Flemish Higher Education Act of 4 April 2003 and the Assessment Framework for New Programmes established by the Dutch Accreditation Organisation (NAO) on 14 February 2003. We aimed for maximum harmonisation between the Dutch and the Flemish frameworks. We deviated from the Dutch framework whenever the Flemish Higher Education Act or differences between the Flemish and Dutch higher education systems so necessitated. For various aspects, these explanatory notes explicitly highlight the connection with the regulations governing higher education in Flanders and explain the themes, standards and criteria within the context of the Flemish situation.

The assessment of new programmes is based on evaluation of the following themes:

- aims and objectives of the programme;
- curriculum;
- staff commitment;
- facilities;
- internal quality assurance;
- conditions for continuity.

These themes have been subdivided into standards. The table below indicates how the themes and standards of the assessment framework tie in with the generic quality standards from the Flemish Higher Education Act (Article 58).

**Generic quality standards,
Higher Education Act**

**Assessment framework for new programmes in
Flanders**

<p>Study contents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - nature and educational level - cohesion in curriculum - workload - relationship between aims and objectives and content <p>Teaching and learning process:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - harmonisation of format and content - tutoring transparent assessment and testing <p>Educational outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - social relevance learning outcomes - success rates <p>Material facilities, quality of staff, organisation and internal quality assurance</p> <p>Self-evaluation methods</p>	<p>Aims and objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - level and orientation, bachelor's degree professional higher education - level and orientation, bachelor's degree academic education - level and orientation master's degree - domain-specific requirements <p>Curriculum:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - requirements for professional and academic orientations - relationship between aims and objectives and content - cohesion in curriculum - workload - admission requirements - number of credits <p>Curriculum:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - relationship between aims and objectives and curriculum - master's thesis <p>Services and facilities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - tutoring <p>(related to macro efficiency check)</p> <p>Staff commitment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - requirements for professional/academic orientations - quantity of staff - quality of staff <p>Services and facilities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - material facilities <p>Conditions for continuity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - graduation guarantee - investments - financial facilities <p>Internal quality assurance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - systematic approach - involvement of staff, students, alumni and professional field <p>n.a.</p>
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Several elements of the generic quality standards – transparent assessment and testing, educational outcomes, self-evaluation methods, harmonisation of format and content – have

not or only partially been included in the criteria for this assessment framework because these elements do not bear an *ex ante* assessment or are fairly irrelevant for the assessment of plans. The additional theme of conditions for continuity has been added in order to ensure that the new programme can actually be offered.

As far as possible, the structure of the assessment framework, the choice of themes, standards and criteria and the level of abstraction observed are in keeping with the Dutch assessment framework.

The point of departure is that the institution, within its authorisation to provide education, submits an application for a new programme as a bachelor's programme with a professional orientation, a bachelor's programme with an academic orientation, a master's programme, an advanced bachelor's programme or an advanced master's programme. For that reason, the programme must be assessed as such.

An assessment of a new programme is aimed at reviewing, on the basis of the themes, standards and criteria of the assessment framework, whether the accreditation organisation is justified in concluding that the programme has sufficient generic quality standards in place. To that end, it may review the plans and finalised curricula but also existing elements that will be used in the new programme (staff, material resources, courses or components of existing programmes that will be incorporated into the new programme...). This does not mean, however, that the quality of achievements or results ensuing from these existing elements will be judged by reference to the existing programme(s), but rather that they will be taken into consideration from the point of view of quality guarantees for the new programme. The presence of these quality guarantees is always assessed on the basis of the assessment framework for new programmes, not the assessment framework for existing programmes, even if certain components of the proposed new programme already exist.

To some extent, the assessment of new programmes imposes different requirements on the expertise of those conducting the assessment than an assessment of existing programmes. Particular differences relate to the *ex ante* assessment of the quality of the programme, the quality of the staff to be committed and the business aspects.

Domain-specific requirements⁶

A programme assessment cannot be based solely on general criteria pertaining to aims and objectives, curriculum, services and facilities, staff commitment and internal quality assurance. In its description, the institution must take account of the requirements set for this specific programme by (foreign) peers and professional or art practice. With regard to regulated professions, the relevant rules and regulations must also be taken into account.

Embedding academic programmes in research

Essential characteristics of programmes with an academic orientation are the fact that these programmes are inseparable from research and the fact that teaching and research are intertwined. Teaching in programmes with an academic orientation must be founded on research. Various paragraphs of the assessment framework comprise requirements relating to the inseparability of research and teaching. These requirements pertain to:

- the aims and objectives of the programmes (in accordance with the stipulations contained in Article 58 of the Higher Education Act);

⁶ The domain-specific requirements operationalise the generic quality standards. They are subordinate to these standards in terms of hierarchy.

- the curriculum (requirements regarding academic orientation, such as interaction between education and research, keeping abreast of academic developments and current academic theories, guaranteeing skills in the field of research and the master's thesis);
- staff commitment (teaching is principally provided by researchers who contribute to the development of their field of study).

These requirements pertain to all programmes with an academic orientation. Their assessment must also be based on the research activities of the staff (such as research projects, doctoral research and academic output). The actual interpretation of the requirements will vary according to the nature of the programme (bachelor's, master's or advanced master's) and their position in the course of the programme. As a rule, master's programmes will tend to be more firmly embedded in research than bachelor's programmes and the introduction of research skills will feature primarily in master's programmes, most prominently in the master's thesis. Depending on the domain-specific nature of the programme, the requirements to be met by the programmes will be specified in more detail (cf. the explanatory note to Chapter 2, the curriculum).

Scope

A positive result in the initial accreditation is one of the conditions for new programmes, whether provided by statutory registered institutions or by non-statutory registered institutions, to be recognised and included on the Higher Education Register. Registration of the programme on the Higher Education Register is a requirement for the authority to award recognised bachelor's and master's degrees. Under the Higher Education Act, the possibility is created for other institutions to be registered, offer recognised bachelor's and master's programmes and award the protected bachelor's and master's degrees. New programmes that are offered by such registered institutions must also pass the initial accreditation.

Advanced bachelor's and advanced master's programmes

The entrance requirements for advanced bachelor's and advanced master's programmes differ from those that apply for regular bachelor's and master's programmes. Otherwise, these programmes must meet the same quality requirements as other bachelor's and master's programmes.

Explanatory notes, chapter by chapter

Chapter 1: Structure of the assessment framework

The assessment framework comprises substantive criteria and criteria for the procedures to be followed with regard to the assessment and the initial accreditation report. Unlike the assessment of existing programmes, the assessment of new programmes does not offer the additional opportunity to review distinctive features. Our point of departure is that such features must first have demonstrated their worth in actual practice before they can be judged.

Chapter 2: Evaluation framework

The accreditation organisation reviews the assessment of the new programme on the basis of the criteria laid down in the assessment framework. These criteria refer to the statutory generic quality standards. The object of the assessment is to ascertain whether potentially sufficient generic quality standards are in place.

– *Re 2.1: Aims and objectives of the programme*

The aims and objectives of the programme refer to the statutory competencies students must acquire in the intended programmes.

The aims and objectives of the programme must be geared to the domain-specific quality requirements and general criteria regarding the level and orientation of bachelor's programmes with a professional orientation and bachelor's / master's programmes with an academic orientation. In addition, the aims and objectives of the programme must reflect the intention to keep abreast of recent developments in the discipline and, as the occasion arises, professional practice.

– *Re 2.2: Curriculum*

The aims and objectives pursued must be convincingly concretised in the curriculum of the programme. In addition, the proposed contents and format of that curriculum (including the attainment targets) must enable qualified entering students to acquire the envisaged competencies within the stipulated timeframe. A review of the translation of the aims and objectives into the curriculum requires a substantive review of the study package and the educational set-up, given the specific choice for bachelor's and master's programmes with either a professional or an academic orientation and the domain in question. Compared to bachelor's programmes, a master's programme will be characterised by a more in-depth and/or broader approach. Programmes with a professional orientation will tend to focus on the introduction of knowledge and experience from current professional practice, whereas embedding in research and developing research skills constitute essential aspects of programmes with an academic orientation. Some academic programmes, however, have an additional professional orientation. For that reason, the requirements for academic bachelor's and master's programmes also stipulate that the curricula of eligible programmes must have demonstrable ties with current practice in relevant professions.

In order to be able to review the programmes in this context, those who conduct the assessment will usually have to command relevant domain-specific expertise.

Depending on the domain-specific contents of the master's programmes, higher requirements will be set for certain standards. For example, for master's programmes with a particular focus on researcher training, the domain-specific requirements will need to tie in with international standards for such programmes; in the review of the aims and objectives of these programmes, the emphasis will be placed on mastering the competencies required for independently conducting research at a newly-qualified researcher's level; and the

embedding of these programmes in research will have to meet more stringent requirements. This means that higher requirements will be set for, among other things, the research capacity of the staff and their experience in training newly-qualified researchers, a broad research orientation in the curriculum, the academic interpretation of the master's thesis and the connection with current academic developments.

As applied academic research is also one of the tasks of university colleges, (applied) research has been included in the options for knowledge development for bachelor's programmes with a professional orientation.

A plan for a new programme will need to explain in clear terms how the new programme will be organised. Attention must be paid to the cohesion between the aims and objectives and the contents of the curriculum, the cohesion within the curriculum, the workload and the manner in which the programme is tailored to the enrolling students. The plan must sketch a realistic picture of the practice of the intended programme. The wording of the assessment framework, on the basis of which the curriculum is reviewed, leaves sufficient room for current developments with regard to the standards referred to above.

The quality of the curriculum will also have to be demonstrated by the manner in which the curriculum is geared to the qualifications of enrolling students. Important considerations in this respect are the statutory requirements for bachelor's and master's programmes, as outlined in the assessment framework.

Whereas the programme curriculum is reviewed as a model course for the realisation of its aims and objectives, on the students' side the introduction of the Flexibilisation of Higher Education Act in Flanders has created opportunities for individualised training routes, flexible curricula, learning environments, educational organisation and the recognition of prior learning. As the occasion arises, these forms of flexibilisation, students' careers guidance and their study progress counselling will be taken into consideration in the review of the themes, standards and criteria involved.

– *Ad 2.3: Staff commitment*

The commitment of staff is an important condition for quality and decisive for the distinction between professional and academic orientations. A significant part of programmes with a professional orientation will be taught by staff who establish a connection between the programme and professional or arts practice. Programmes with an academic orientation, on the other hand, will largely be taught by researchers who contribute to the development of the discipline (including research in the arts). In addition, the appropriate academic programmes will have sufficient staff with knowledge of and insight into the relevant professional or arts practice.

The institution must indicate the number of staff to be committed to the new programme, the availability of such staff and the quality of the intended staff. The review of the intended staff commitment to the programme weighs heavily, as the quality of the new programme will be directly determined by the available staff. A separate consideration is whether this commitment suffices for launching the programme – which will require an additional effort – and for its continuation on a regular basis. The assessment will also have to review whether the staff designated by the institution as deployable will indeed be available for the new programme.

The Higher Education Act does not explicitly mention the standard of staff quantity among the generic quality standards.⁷ This standard has been included in the assessment framework because the presence of sufficient staff is an evident condition for generic quality.

– *Re 2.4: Services and facilities*

The criteria that apply to the services and facilities are, in principle, identical to those observed in the accreditation of existing programmes. The services and facilities must be sufficient to realise the curriculum. The institution must make a reasonable case that the services and facilities concerned will be available (in time).

The services and facilities will likely include, for example, media centres, laboratories, educational equipment, studio space or subject-specific data bases. The nature and level of these services and facilities differ depending on the nature of the programme. The assessment will check whether the services and facilities for the new programmes are in accordance with the generally received level of quality for such services and facilities.

– *Re 2.5: Internal quality assurance*

The institution must demonstrate that it intends to pursue an acceptable level of quality from the outset of the new programme and will subsequently continuously seek to monitor and improve that quality. These intentions are more likely if the institution as a whole has in place an effective system of internal quality assurance that covers all its programmes.

– *Re 2.6: Conditions for continuity*

One of the objects assessed with regard to new programmes is the uncertainties involved in a starting situation, in particular the question of whether the administrative and staff conditions warrant the sustainable realisation of the intended substantive quality. These conditions pertain to both the programme as such and the institution providing it. It must be likely that the institution can raise the required initial investment and continue to run the programme, in the longer term as well, at least for the number of years required to build up a full curriculum and the corresponding population of enrolled students. In principle, this period of time equals the envisaged duration of the curriculum, depending on the nature of the programme (bachelor's programmes with a professional orientation, bachelor's and master's programmes with an academic orientation, advanced bachelor's programmes, advanced master's programmes). As a rule, this will be demonstrated by a business plan for the new programme. The financial strength of the institution as a whole is demonstrated by its annual accounts.

It is advisable that an application for a new programme is accompanied by a plan that shows which programmes the institution intends to offer for the medium range. In this plan, which will usually form part of a long-range plan or a strategic memorandum, the institution can make a reasonable case that:

- the intended new programme is an expression of the institution's strategic policy and the ensuing priorities in the programmes offered;
- it will be capable, in terms of business economics, of providing the total range of existing and intended programmes in a permanent manner.

The above plan can also serve as source of information for assessing whether the intended investments and the envisaged operation of the new programme are realistic in the context of the overall plans and expenditure of the institution. Submitting such a plan is not mandatory on the part of the institution but can support the assessment process.

⁷ The Dutch legislation does not explicitly mention this standard either.

To the accreditation organisation, the data concerned is of importance in the longer term as well. In case of a subsequent application for accreditation, the accreditation organisation will ascertain or have ascertained whether the institution has fulfilled the conditions for continuity and acted consistently in line with the intentions stated in its application for recognition.

Chapter 3: Assessment rules

The assessment results in a summarising review of the potential quality of the new programme, with a positive or negative overall conclusion regarding the presence of sufficient generic quality standards. A positive final conclusion requires a satisfactory score on all themes of the assessment framework. For each theme, the conclusion is based on a review of the various standards contained in that theme. The initial accreditation report gives a transparent overview of the considerations at all levels – standards, themes and final conclusion – which provides clarity regarding the underpinning of the final conclusion and the weighing-up of the various standards.

Programmes may comprise more than one specialisation. If these specialisations set different requirements with regard to a number of quality aspects – such as cohesion, tutoring, staff commitment and tailoring to entering students – the review must demonstrate that sufficient generic quality standards are potentially in place for each specialisation. The assessment, however, concerns the programme as a whole. A similar assessment rule applies to new programmes that are provided at more than one location.

Chapter 4: Initial accreditation procedure

In its assessment of new programmes, the accreditation organisation ties in with the requirements and timeframes laid down in the Flemish Higher Education Act and the regulations regarding the methodology for initial accreditations. An essential feature of this method of working is the initiating role of the institution. It determines the nature of the programme (bachelor's programme with a professional orientation, bachelor's programme with an academic orientation, advanced bachelor's programme, master's programme, advanced master's programme). With regard to programmes provided by statutory registered institutions, applications may only be submitted following a positive conclusion by the Recognition Committee or an (explicit or implicit) positive conclusion by the Flemish government regarding their macro-efficiency. Submitting an application to the accreditation organisation sets the assessment process in motion. Based on the application, the accreditation organisation determines how new this programme is to the Flemish higher education system and consequently how extensively it needs to be assessed. Subsequently, the accreditation organisation commissions external experts to review the application and draw up an advisory report.

On the basis of the advisory report, the accreditation organisation then draws up an initial accreditation report with its summarising conclusion. Guiding elements in the formulation of the report are the benchmarks outlined in this chapter. The conclusions in the initial accreditation report are substantiated on the basis of facts established, which are analysed and tested against a reference framework that ties in with the assessment framework for new programmes.

The initial accreditation report also explains the methods, sources of information and reference framework used for the assessment. With regard to programmes new to the Flemish education system, it indicates how the domain-specific requirements have been mapped out. For existing programmes, it indicates which programmes have been used as a reference.

The initial accreditation report gives an account of the procedure followed.

Before finalising the initial accreditation report, the accreditation organisation allows the board of the institution a term of ten days to present its view regarding the draft initial accreditation report. The initial accreditation report is positive if, in the opinion of the

accreditation organisation, the application gives reasonable cause to assume that the new programme will pass the test regarding the presence of sufficient generic quality standards. The accreditation organisation must explicitly indicate whether or not the initial accreditation is positive.

Following its finalisation, the accreditation organisation submits the initial accreditation report to the board of the institution and the Flemish minister responsible for higher education.

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Attachment 13 List of Abbreviations

AKOV	Agentschap Kwaliteit Onderwijs en Vorming
ANECA	Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación
AQUIN	Akkreditierungs-, Zertifizierungs- und Qualitätssicherungs-Institut für alle Studiengänge
Awb	Algemene wet bestuursrecht
CROHO	Centraal Register Opleidingen Hoger Onderwijs
DLR	Domeinspecifieke Leerresultaten
DUO	Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs
ECA	European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education
EFQM	European Framework of Quality Management
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
E-Train	The project European Training of Quality Assurance experts
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
EVA	Danish Evaluation Institute
HAVO	Hoger Algemeen Voortgezet Onderwijs
hbo	hoger beroepsonderwijs
HBO-raad	Vereniging van hogescholen (Nederland)
HBO5	Hoger beroepsonderwijs op niveau 5 van de Vlaamse kwalificatiestructuur
HOR	Hogeronderwijsregister
IQA	Internal Quality Assurance
JOQAR	Joint programmes: Quality Assurance and Recognition of degrees awarded.
INQAAHE	International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
MBO	Middelbaar beroepsonderwijs
NLQF	Netherlands Qualifications Framework
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NVAO	Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie
OCW	Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen (Nederland)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OZM	onderzoeksmasters
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
QAA	Quality Assurance Agencies
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the United Kingdom

SERV	Sociaal-Economische Raad van Vlaanderen
TEAM II	Transparent European Accreditation decisions & Mutual recognition agreements II
TNO	Toets nieuwe opleiding
UAS	Universities of Applied Sciences
VLHORA	Vlaamse Hogescholenraad
VLIR	Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad
VLOR	Vlaamse Onderwijsraad
VLUHR	Vlaamse Universitaire en Hogescholenraad
VSNU	Vereniging van Samenwerkende Nederlandse Universiteiten
VWO	Voorbereidend Wetenschappelijk Onderwijs
wo	wetenschappelijk onderwijs
WOT	Wet op het onderwijstoezicht