

**Self-Certification of the Dutch and Flemish  
National Qualifications Frameworks for higher  
education vis-à-vis the overarching framework  
for qualifications of the European Higher  
Education Area.**

*Report of the Verification Committee on The  
Netherlands*

*2 February 2009*

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## **1. Executive summary**

The Bologna Process, initiated in 1999, now embraces 46 countries cooperating to create a European Higher Education Area. It contains several action lines. Two of its crucial objectives are to harmonise the structures of national higher education systems and to create transparency within Europe and to the world at large. Another important objective is the expansion of national qualifications frameworks for higher education (NQFs) in line with the newly developed Overarching Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA), also referred to as the *Bologna framework*.

The alignment of the NQFs to the Bologna Framework should be the result of a process of self-certification undertaken by the national authorities. This self-certification involves international experts to verify whether the NQFs are compatible with the Bologna Framework.

This is the report on the Netherlands of the *Committee for the verification of the Dutch and Flemish NQFs*. The Committee has based its report on the documents compiled for this purpose and made available by the national authorities, best described as the compatibility documents, and on-site interviews with the main stakeholders.

The Committee's reference points were the criteria for verification as specified in the Bologna process. The Committee was also invited to give recommendations for the further development of the NQFs.

### **Conclusion**

*It is the opinion of the Verification Committee that the National Framework of Qualifications in Higher Education in the Netherlands is compatible with the overarching Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.*

### **Recommendations**

This report underlines several issues and recommendations relevant to the further development of the Dutch NQF.

The new structure and degrees have yet to overcome old habits and traditions. The relevance of the academic Bachelor's degree for the labour market may be one issue that needs time to be incorporated in a new higher education tradition. It is recommended that the communication activities targeted at the main stakeholders and the public at large are intensified.

Progression issues were raised by many stakeholders. It seems that the new structure needs more time to develop and become accepted throughout the higher education community and its external stakeholders. Enhanced communication to each group of stakeholders, especially students and employers, seems crucial.

Universities should ensure that WO Master's programmes are accessible to as wide a range of potential learners as possible, and are not designed exclusively around the needs of those entering directly from the WO Bachelor's programme. Other learner groups include holders of HBO Bachelor's degrees, WO Bachelor graduates who have spent time in the work force and holders of Bachelor's degrees from abroad. Accommodations for these groups may include bridging or refresher studies, procedures for the recognition or accreditation of prior learning and modes of study other than full-time.

The honours programme, associated with some WO Bachelors degrees, is a noteworthy development and the Committee understands the desire not to be too explicit or prescriptive about its place in the framework at this time. However, in due course the framework should ensure that those who complete the programme receive appropriate recognition.

A major ambition behind the national qualifications framework is to include *all* learning achievements. The position of shorter courses or non-degree programmes within the framework should be promoted.

The absence of the protection of titles was mentioned by many stakeholders. It is the opinion of the Committee that this issue deserves some attention, especially for the sake of external transparency and communication.

An important task of an NQF is to be transparent to the international public. The Committee has the impression that the binary orientation of the qualifications, including the names of the different titles, requires ample communication towards other educational systems. Specific and targeted communication seems advisable, with an important role for the NARIC. The communication activities should target both the incoming students and the Dutch graduates seeking employment or further education abroad.

The issue of recognition will be on national and international agendas for the next few years, because some problems remain to be solved.

The 60 ECTS value of Master's degrees will need to be examined also in the context of international recognition.

The Diploma Supplement, obligatory as it is, will need further development, especially regarding currently absent learning outcomes. Also, uniformity of the format used might be further promoted.

## 2. Introduction – the overarching Framework on the European Higher Education Area

In Bologna in 1999, education ministers from 29 countries initiated a process in which 46 European countries currently participate: the creation of a *European Higher Education Area* (EHEA). This European transnational process, referred to as the Bologna process, should contribute to making European higher education more competitive with and attractive to (students from) other world regions. One of its key goals was transparency, a term that was used in many of the different action lines the Bologna process initiated.

One action line was geared towards restructuring higher education programmes and the resulting qualifications. A comparable structure of qualifications should make the educational systems of the participating countries more compatible in the context of *cross border mobility* and *international recognition of qualifications and study periods*. The higher education systems of the participating countries should follow a three-tier structure consisting of three cycles, each resulting in a qualification, leaving room for intermediate qualifications within one cycle. In many countries the main qualifications are indicated as Bachelor's, Master's and Ph.D./Doctor's degrees.

Another action line was related to quality assurance, fostering *mutual trust* in each others' educational processes and outcomes, resulting in the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA* and the *European Register of Quality Agencies*.

In the action line concerning degree structures, the Bologna process also focused on the expansion of national frameworks of qualifications. This was a central theme at the ministerial Berlin meeting of 2003, where the education ministers called upon the participating countries to set up such frameworks. At the ministerial meeting in Bergen in 2005, the ministers adopted an overarching Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA), also referred to as the *Bologna framework*<sup>1</sup>, which was developed by an expert Working Group.

In the context of the Bologna framework, general descriptors for all three cycles, known as the *Dublin Descriptors*, have been developed and eventually accepted by the different stakeholders in the Bologna process. These descriptors specify the general achievements of learners upon conclusion of one the cycles.

Transparency and mutual trust are key elements for attaining cross-border recognition. Mutual trust in the quality of the different education systems and their programmes is to be complemented by mutual trust in the comparability of qualifications and learning achievements. The latter is to be guaranteed by a system of national qualifications frameworks made comparable and compatible through the overarching Bologna framework. In fact, this will crown the process of restructuring national education systems into three cycles of qualifications.

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<sup>1</sup> Parallel to the developments described in the Bologna process, another overarching framework has been adopted by the European Union: European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF). This framework goes beyond the borders of higher education and encompasses all qualifications and learning achievements. The EQF is not part of this certification process and will therefore not be mentioned separately in this report.

The ministers agreed that the national authorities themselves should verify in a self-certification procedure whether their national qualifications frameworks were compatible with the Bologna framework. It was recommended that the use of a committee of external and partially international experts would be an element of this self-certification process.

The Dutch and Flemish national authorities decided to undertake this certification process jointly, and commissioned their joint accreditation agency, the Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) to organise it.

The NVAO set up the *Committee for the verification of the Dutch and Flemish NQFs*.

In accordance with the Terms of Reference, this committee's main task was "to verify whether the Dutch and Flemish National Qualification Frameworks for higher education (NQFs) are compatible with the overarching framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The committee will base its conclusions on the criteria for the verification that are specified below. The committee may also give recommendations with regard to the further development of the NQFs."

The Committee consists of the following experts:

- Dr. Bryan Maguire (chair): Director of Academic Affairs, Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) in Dublin; former member of the steering group for verification of the Irish NQF; former National Qualifications Authority of Ireland; expert Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks; member QA working group of EURASHE.
- Dr. Carita Blomqvist: Counsellor of Education, Finnish National Board of Education (ENIC/NARIC); President of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee.
- Dr. Sandra Elman: President, Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities in Redmond, Washington.
- Prof. Dr. Luc Francois: Director Association Ghent University; former director of education of Ghent University.
- Prof. Dr. Cees Karssen: former rector magnificus Wageningen University; chair of the Committee for Evaluation of Lectors and Knowledge Circles in Universities of Applied Sciences.
- Mr. Jindra Divis (secretary), general director of European Platform – internationalising education in Haarlem, former director of the Centre for International Recognition of Nuffic, former chair of ENIC network, former member of the NARIC Advisory Board.
- Process coordinator: Dr. Mark Frederiks, NVAO.

Apart from the documents presented to the Committee, the members also had access to existing NQFs and were informed about the ongoing developments elsewhere.

The present document is the Committee's report on the Netherlands.

### 3. The national education system and the NQF<sup>2</sup>

#### 3.1. The qualifications structure

##### 3.1.1. Introduction

The Netherlands were among the first Continental countries to restructure their national education system along the lines of the Bologna requirements. The present higher education system consists of three cycles, each cycle awarding a final qualification: the Bachelor's, Master's and Doctor's degrees. Within the first cycle an intermediate qualification is being developed in a pilot project: the Associate Degree. The latter degree is a qualification in itself, but the graduate may continue in the programme leading up to the Bachelor's degree.

##### 3.1.2. Binary system

A peculiarity of the Dutch system, though not unique in the world, is the strict binary division between research-oriented and professionally oriented programmes. The orientation is built into the programme by the institution and is verified through the accreditation process. Although the division is specifically focused on education programmes and less on institutions, it is safe to say that the binary system can also be perceived in institutional terms. The research universities (*universiteiten*) concentrate on more academic or research-oriented programmes (*wetenschappelijk onderwijs*, WO), whereas the universities of applied science (*hogescholen*) focus on the professionally oriented programmes (*hoger beroepsonderwijs*, HBO).

There are two other distinctions on the level of institutions. Firstly, there is a difference between government-funded and non-funded institutions. Secondly, within the non-funded category there is a distinction between recognised and non-recognised private institutions. The recognised institutions may offer Bachelor's and Master's programmes for accreditation, the non-recognized institutions are only allowed to offer post-graduate programmes.

##### 3.1.3. Qualifications and credits

In general terms, the "pre-Bologna" higher education systems consisted of 'long' 4-5 years' programmes in the WO-sector, leading to the titles of doctorandus (drs.), meester (mr.) and ingenieur (ir.), depending on the discipline. The HBO-sector offered a 4-years' programme leading to the title of baccalaureus (bc.) or ingenieur (ing.). The WO-graduate was entitled to use the title of Master (M.Sc. or M.A.), while the HBO-sector employed the title of Bachelor.

The Doctorate was open to holders of a WO-degree.

In 2002, a new structure was introduced along the lines of the Bologna process: Bachelor's and Master's degrees, in both orientations (WO and HBO). However, only

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<sup>2</sup> The following description was based on the materials available to the Verification Committee. The Committee has decided to include only the main information relevant to this report. For a full account, the reader is referred to the documents as outlined in paragraph 7 (References).

a minority of the Master's degree programmes in the HBO-sector are funded by government.

At the same time a credit system in accordance with ECTS was introduced for the first two cycles of the new degree structure, so that programmes are now referred to in credits rather than in years. A full-time year covers 60 ECTS.

Both orientations include *Bachelor's* and *Master's degrees* at the same level, but with a different orientation. The *Doctor's degree* (Ph.D.) is being offered solely by the research universities.

The first cycle qualifications (Bachelor's degrees) include 180 and 240 ECTS in the WO and HBO sectors respectively. The research universities developed honours (Bachelor's) programmes in order to offer extra opportunities to small groups of highly motivated students whose abilities and wishes go beyond the standard programmes.

The Associate Degree, part of the HBO programmes, covers 120 ECTS.

The second cycle qualifications (Master's degrees) contain 60 to 180 ECTS (the higher number in e.g. medical studies) even up to 240 ECTS (for specific degrees in architecture and urban planning).

In the Dutch system, the 60 ECTS Master's degree is a fairly common degree within Humanities and Social Sciences, whereas this degree in Natural Sciences, Technology and Agricultural Sciences contains 120 ECTS.

The Research Master's degree, a specific degree geared towards academic research to be approved by the Minister (see 3.2), has a study load of 120 ECTS.

In the third cycle (Doctorate's degree, Design Engineer and Medical Specialist) credits are not used.

The titles offered differ not only from discipline to discipline, but also between the orientations. The titles of B.Sc./M.Sc. and B.A./M.A. are awarded solely after completion of research-oriented programmes. The titles in the HBO sector are specifically linked to disciplines or professions (please see the compatibility document).

The legacy awards (former titles of drs., mr., ir., ing, and bc.) are still legally valid. This is regulated in the Law on Higher Education.

As a crucial instrument for transparency, the *Diploma Supplement* has been made obligatory by national legislation for all accredited programmes.

#### **3.1.4. Progression**

An important issue in light of the NQF is the progression between qualifications, and the initial access to the system.

In the Netherlands, access to the higher education programmes is explicitly regulated by law, differentiating between access to the research-oriented and professionally oriented programmes and institutions. Different secondary streams prepare for the two orientations within higher education.

The professionally oriented programmes have to take into account a lower educational level of incoming students, which explains the longer nominal duration of the first degrees (4-years' Bachelor's degrees in contrast to the 3-years' equivalent in the research-oriented sector).

One specific point of access is that WO-programmes are open to students who have completed their first year in the HBO sector (*propedeuse*).

Progression between the cycles is organized within one orientation (WO or HBO) and between both orientations, with or without special bridging courses. These courses may be contained already within the previous cycle. The bridging courses between the orientations are often facilitated by institutional agreements.

The law stipulates that at least one 'automatic progression' Master's degree (doorstroommaster) is set up for every research-oriented Bachelor's programme. In such cases, there is no additional selection procedure.

Figures presented to the Verification Committee show that in the research-oriented sector most students follow a Master's programme at the same institution (86%) where they took their Bachelor's. The mobility between institutions, an important objective behind the implementation of the new structure, has not yet materialised.

The figures also show that a vast majority of Bachelor's students (79%) choose Master's programmes that offer automatic progression, that is, ones without additional selection procedures.

One of the explanations given for both trends is that many students are admitted to a Master's programme before having finished a Bachelor's programme. Nevertheless, they have to graduate as a Bachelor before they can receive their Master's degree. At the moment, disallowing progression before attaining a Bachelor's degree is being discussed.

Universities also offer programmes leading to postgraduate<sup>3</sup> or advanced Master's degrees. The access requirement is a previous 'regular' Master's degree. The Committee found no evidence that the educational advancement of these Master's programmes has received a reference within the NQF. In other words, these Master's degrees are not specifically included in the NQF. The same is true for the non-degree programmes of HE institutions (see 3.3).

Officially, all degrees offered are considered to have labour market relevance.

Admission to the Doctorate's degree is within the competency of each *research university*, with a Master's degree being the customary or basic requirement.

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<sup>3</sup> Dutch legislation distinguishes between 'initial' and 'post-initial' education. This distinction is related to the system of funding and not to levels of education. Initial education (e.g. initial Master's degrees) is funded by the government, while post-initial education (postgraduate or post-initial Master's degrees) in principle, is not.

### 3.2. Accreditation

The accreditation process provides a link between qualifications, learning outcomes and quality assurance.

The accreditation of HE programmes is organized by the Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie, NVAO (the Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders).

Accreditation focuses on programmes, not institutions, although institutional audit is being introduced in the Netherlands. There are two forms of accreditation: accreditation of existing programmes and initial accreditation of future programmes. An important difference between these two is that in the case of initial accreditation the *achieved* learning outcomes cannot be assessed. A procedural difference is that quality assessment agencies are involved in the accreditation process, whereas in initial accreditation, it is the NVAO itself that sets up the external panel for on-site visits to institutions.

The NVAO is responsible for the accreditation of the programmes within the first two cycles. For one specific category, the Research Master's degree, the NVAO, together with the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), acts as an advisor to the Education Minister.

The KNAW is charged with quality assurance of research training and the accreditation of research or graduate schools.

The accreditation process in the Netherlands largely consist of three steps.

- The institution writes a self-evaluation report (accreditation) or programme dossier (initial accreditation).
- The external panel makes an on-site visit, and the quality assessment agency (the NVAO itself in the case of pre-accreditation) makes an assessment.
- The NVAO makes its decision.

***Learning outcomes*** play an essential role in the accreditation process.

The NVAO's accreditation frameworks use standards and criteria to assess six categories of aims and objectives. The criteria are divided among the binary orientations (see 3.1.2.). Learning outcomes are relevant in several interlinked instances. A programme is expected to define its intended learning outcomes, i.e. the competences acquired upon completion of the programme. In the external assessment it should be proven that these intended outcomes are in line with the level *and* subject requirements of the programme. The external panel uses the Dublin Descriptors to ascertain the level. As for the subject requirements, it is crucial that "prior to the assessment of the programme, the external or assessment panel should produce a subject-/discipline-specific frame of reference in which they specify what the learning outcomes of the programme should be to offer sufficient generic quality", as stated in the *NVAO Self-Evaluation Report, Part 2*). In this way, the ongoing process of accreditation increases the quantity of subject-specific or discipline-specific learning outcomes. Furthermore, the panel should examine whether the curriculum is organised in a way most likely to support the intended outcomes.

The assessment process also seeks to provide evidence that the outcomes are actually achieved by the learners. This, of course, can only be ascertained in the accreditation of existing programmes.

As mentioned, HE institutions are expected to define their programmes in terms of learning outcomes. The amount of national and international descriptors to facilitate this process is growing. In the Netherlands, professionally oriented programmes have developed national profiles at programme level in accordance with the Dublin Descriptors. Domain competences have been defined based on these profiles.

The three Technological Universities have developed criteria for Bachelor's and Master's degrees based on the Dublin Descriptors.

Only accredited programmes can be registered in the Central Register for Higher Education Programmes (CROHO) and the resulting qualification awards are considered officially recognized. These programmes can qualify for government funding – provided that the institutions themselves are government-funded - and students are entitled to receive grants.

(Initial) accreditation in the Netherlands has a validity of 6 years.

### **3.3. Lifelong learning**

Through discussions with stakeholders, and to a lesser extent through the material provided, the Committee found that additional learning achievements were accounted for in some way, but not explicitly within the NQF. In general, non-degree programmes offered by higher education institutions are part of quality-assessed (accredited) programmes. Most institutions also assess learning achievements of students in terms of Accreditation of Prior Learning (*Elders Verworven Competenties*, EVC), through which exemptions can be granted.

### **3.4. The National Qualifications Framework**

The compatibility document states that the qualifications framework is not new policy, but that it is a further step along the road to transparency and harmonization of the degree structure. Furthermore, it states that “it is a tool for institutions to use when setting up a programme or revising curricula in order to describe the level and the learning outcomes in knowledge, skills and other competences so that they are internationally understood and comparable.”

The NQF, as presented to the verification committee, should be seen as a compilation of separate but interlinked developments of the national education system, with an emphasis on further progress. Its main elements are the introduction of the three cycles' degree structure, the description of the learning outcomes of educational programmes, the accreditation system and the introduction of credits (compatible to ECTS).

#### **4. Criteria for verifying that national frameworks are compatible with the Bologna framework<sup>4</sup>**

**4.1.** *The national framework for higher education qualifications and the body or bodies responsible for its development are designated by the national ministry with responsibility for higher education.*

**4.1.1.** In the Netherlands, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) has final responsibility for the national framework for higher education qualifications.

**4.1.2.** For the maintenance of the framework, the Ministry has delegated its powers to the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO). The NVAO is the responsible authority for accreditation of HE programmes.

**4.1.3.** The HE institutions are to implement the NQF through the development of programmes and qualifications.

**4.2.** *There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications in the national framework and the cycle qualification descriptors of the European framework.*

**4.2.1.** The core of the Dutch NQF is the continued and expanded application of the Dublin Descriptors in the three cycles. The ‘validation procedure’ is the main component of the accreditation process. In this procedure, the recognized qualifications are formulated in outcomes compatible to the Dublin Descriptors.

**4.2.2.** This refers also to the intermediate qualification in the first cycle, in the sense that this qualification is explicitly aligned with the professionally oriented HBO-Bachelor’s programme. It should be noted that this qualification is still in the pilot stage and that the precise position of this qualification within the NQF still seems to be under consideration.

**4.2.3.** The compatibility document clearly states that the qualifications at the completion of the first cycle are labour market relevant. This is the official policy and vision. In paragraph 5, which outlines the issues raised by stakeholders, we will touch upon the matter that the acceptance of the academic Bachelor’s programme still has to overcome a strong tradition in this respect.

**4.2.4.** As stated in paragraph 3.1.3., the legacy awards (pre-Bologna qualifications) have been incorporated in the NQF. The current degrees are protected in the sense that Dutch legislation prohibits HE institutions falling under HE Law (i.e. funded and recognized HE institutions) to award the Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees upon completion of non-accredited programmes.

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<sup>4</sup> Apart from information on the ongoing verification processes in other countries, an important contextual document was the report of 2007 of the *Qualifications Framework Working Group*.

**4.3.** *The national framework and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes and the qualifications are linked to ECTS or ECTS compatible credits.*

**4.3.1.** The qualifications are explicitly based on learning outcomes, although their scope and details vary. In general, the use of competences is more developed in the HBO-sector than in the WO-sector. However, learning outcomes play a crucial role in the very first stage of the accreditation process (described in paragraph 3.2).

**4.3.2.** The programmes and qualifications are linked to ECTS-compatible credits.

**4.4.** *The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national framework are transparent.*

**4.4.1.** The inclusion of the present qualifications is the result of a transparent national process, coordinated by the Ministry. The introduction of the present qualifications was the outcome of the restructuring of the Dutch higher education system along the Bologna lines.

**4.4.2.** Inclusion of possible new qualifications is also a responsibility of the Ministry as part of the regular legislative process. In the Netherlands, this process is transparent and involves different stakeholders.

**4.4.3.** The accredited programmes are registered in a public register (Central Higher Education Register, CROHO).

**4.5.** *The national quality assurance systems for higher education refer to the national framework of qualifications and are consistent with the Berlin Communiqué and any subsequent communiqué agreed by ministers in the Bologna Process.*

Regarding this point, we refer above all to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

In 2007, the national education Ministries of The Netherlands and Flanders commissioned an international peer review of the NVAO, taking the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) of ENQA (and the code of good practice of ECA) as a framework for the evaluation. The outcome was codified in two of the documents available to the Verification Committee: *Report of the Committee for the Review of the Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), Self Evaluation Report 2007* and *Part 2, NVAO Self-evaluation Report*, ( NVAO, 2007).

For our conclusion we quote from the former report (page 55):

*7.1 NVAO compliance with ENQA/ESG*

*In the light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the review Committee is satisfied that, in the performance of its 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 should have its Full Membership of ENQA confirmed for a further period of five years.*

*(7.2 NVAO compliance with ECA Code of Good Practice  
In the light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the Review Panel is satisfied that, in the performance of its functions, NVAO is in compliance with the ECA Code of Good Practice.)*

On 5 December 2008, the NVAO has been included as one of the first European quality assurance agencies in the independent European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

**4.6.** *The national framework, and any alignment with the European framework, is referenced in all Diploma Supplements.*

In Dutch higher education, HE institutions are obliged to give out Diploma Supplements. The Ministry has stated explicitly that the outcomes of the verification process will be incorporated in the Diploma Supplement.

**4.7.** *The responsibilities of the domestic parties to the national framework are clearly determined and published.*

**4.7.1.** The main party responsible for the NQF is the Ministry of Education, which has delegated its monitoring and maintenance to the NVAO. The Ministry has explicitly stated that the information will be disseminated to all relevant stakeholders and, in general terms, to the public at large.

**4.7.2.** The Ministry has charged the Informatie Beheer Groep with the professional recognition of foreign teaching qualifications and academic recognition of foreign titles and degrees. Other appropriate authorities are in charge of professional recognition of qualifications in other professional fields. HE institutions are responsible for academic recognition for study-related purposes themselves. The Dutch ENIC/NARIC (Nuffic) has an advisory role in both professional and academic recognition as well as a disseminating and informative task to all possible stakeholders and the public.

## **5. Issues raised by stakeholders and recommendations**

### **5.1. Stakeholders**

On 5 and 6 November, the Verification Committee was able to discuss the NQF and its conformity to the Bologna Framework with representatives of the main stakeholders in the Netherlands.

The stakeholders were the following.

The Board of the NVAO

- Guy Aelterman, Vice-Chairman
- Leendert Klaassen, Executive Board Member
- Guido Langouche, Executive Board Member

Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU)

- Christiaan van der Berg, Policy advisor for education
- Hans de Jonge, Policy advisor for education

Dutch ENIC/NARIC (Nuffic) and recognition authority (IB-Groep)

Nuffic:

- Lucie de Bruin - Head of the Dutch NARIC, Communication Directorate, Credential evaluation Department (NARIC)
- Robert Warmerhoven - Senior Credential Evaluator, Communication Directorate, Credential evaluation Department (NARIC)
- Jenneke Lokhoff - Policy Officer, Innovation Directorate, Studies Department

IB-Groep:

- Herman de Leeuw, advisor on authenticity issues and falsifications
- Jan Otten, legal policy advisor

Platform of recognised private education providers (PAEPON)

- Anna Bakker, Director of PAEPON

Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (HBO-raad)

- Tamara Wanker, Policy Advisor
- Erwin van Braam, Head of Policy Unit, HBO-raad

Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences (OCW)

- Roel Endert, Head of Policy Unit, Department of Higher Education and Student Support
- Denise Heiligers, Senior policy advisor, Department of Higher Education and Student Support

Bologna experts

- Robert Wagenaar, Co-ordinator of team of Bologna experts, University of Groningen
- Leonard van der Hout, Member of team of Bologna experts, University of Applied Sciences Amsterdam
- Madalena Pereira, Secretary of team of Bologna experts, Nuffic

Student union representatives (LSVB and ISO)

- Jochim Schueler, Board Member of ISO
- Thijs de Wit, Board Member of LSBV (responsible for Accreditation)
- Zarko Baban, Board Member of LSBV

Employers and union representatives (VNO-NCW, MKB NL, AoB) apologised and sent a note expounding their views on the matter.

## **5.2. General observations**

The NQF in the Netherlands seems part of the implementation of the different action lines of the Bologna process, rather than a stand-alone exercise. It is clear from the documents and the communication about the process to stakeholders and the

Verification Committee, that the whole course of implementing and disseminating the NQF is perceived as an ongoing process. The compatibility document mainly describes the current state of affairs, specifically the process of implementing the European Qualification Framework for Lifelong Learning.

The stakeholders taking part in the interviews were clearly involved in this process and, in general terms, all approved of the NQF and its description. However, they expressed a wish that the NQF would be incorporated in a more vigorous communication campaign and be a more explicit part of the overall policy of both the Ministry and the institutions.

### **5.3. Issues raised by stakeholders**

It is not possible, nor necessary, to go over all the issues raised. We will mention those issues that we identified as specifically relevant for the further development of the NQF, as confirmed by the Terms of Reference. Where possible, we have formulated specific recommendations.

**5.3.1.** The new structure and degrees have yet to overcome old habits and traditions. The relevance of the WO Bachelor's degree for the labour market may well be part of the official educational policy for the future, but neither the social partners nor the universities are enthusiastic about this. If the universities keep encouraging students to progress automatically into the second cycle, employers will not have the opportunity to change their perceptions about this qualification. Because of this, it will be difficult to enhance the relevance of the WO Bachelor's degree for the labour market.

Progression issues were raised by many stakeholders. It seems that the formal decision to introduce the new qualifications (Bachelor's/Master's degrees) was ahead of the conceptual discussion within the educational community. It was mentioned that some of the issues are still under discussion - e.g. the option of accessing a WO Bachelor's programme with an HBO-propedeuse, or the possible prohibition of progressing to WO Master's programmes before the completion of a Bachelor's programme. It seems that the new structure needs more time to develop and become accepted throughout the higher education community and its external stakeholders. Enhanced communication to the different groups of stakeholders, particularly students and employers, is crucial.

Universities should ensure that WO Master's programmes are accessible to as wide a range of potential learners as possible, and are not designed exclusively around the needs of those entering directly from the WO Bachelor programme. Other learner groups include holders of HBO Bachelor's degrees, WO Bachelor graduates who have spent time in the work force and holders of Bachelor's degrees from abroad. Accommodations for these groups may include bridging or refresher studies, procedures for the recognition or accreditation of prior learning and modes of study other than full-time.

**5.3.2.** The protection of the current degrees was mentioned by many stakeholders. It appeared to be a rather complicated issue. In the Netherlands the relevant legislation does not focus on the *holders* of Bachelor's and Master's degrees. It stipulates that HE *institutions* that fall under HE Law may only award degrees upon completion of accredited programmes. The reason behind this is that

legislation geared towards holders of degrees would also concern foreign degrees and would create possible recognition problems. However, current policy does imply that non-recognized private institutions in the Netherlands may award low quality Bachelor's and Master's degrees to native as well as to foreign students.

A possible solution might be to allow the use of Bachelor's and Master's degrees on the sole provision that they are accredited, quality-assured or recognized through the appropriate procedures in the educational system in which they originate. It is the opinion of the Committee that this issue deserves some attention, especially for the sake of external transparency and communication.

**5.3.3.** An important task of an NQF is to be transparent to the international public. The Committee has the impression that the binary orientation of the qualifications, including the names of the different titles, requires ample communication towards other educational systems, especially given that the Netherlands have a strict binary division linked to specific institutions. Specific and targeted communication seems advisable, with an important role for the NARIC. The communication activities should target both incoming students and Dutch graduates seeking employment or further education abroad.

**5.3.4.** Recognition issues were raised on more than one occasion. There still seems to be a difference of opinion between accreditation and international recognition communities on the issue of non-recognition due to “substantial differences”, especially where duration or study load is concerned.

**5.3.5.** Another noteworthy issue in light of both the Bologna-agreements and international recognition is the observation that many Master's programmes in the Netherlands consist of 60 EC. Ongoing international cooperation, including the development of joint degrees, will have to show whether this situation poses an obstacle to mutual recognition.

**5.3.6.** The issue of transparency was also raised vis-à-vis the Diploma Supplement (DS). Uniformity of the format used for the DS, an important issue from the Bologna perspective, is still an issue within the HBO sector. According to the relevant representatives, this issue is being dealt with.

Many stakeholders mentioned the absence of learning outcomes<sup>5</sup> in the DS as a major shortcoming. This issue should be dealt with on national and institutional levels.

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<sup>5</sup> The possibility of including learning outcomes in the Diploma Supplement has already been created on an international level. See paragraph 4.1 of the “Explanatory Notes to the Joint European Diploma Supplement”. Status: adopted by the Committee of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region at its 4<sup>th</sup> session in Bucharest, Romania 19 June 2007: *Where available, provide details of the learning outcomes, knowledge, skills, competencies and stated aims and objectives associated with the qualification. This information, which relates to outcomes rather than procedures of learning, will increasingly be the key basis on which qualifications are assessed.*

**5.3.7.** Lifelong learning, including Accreditation of Prior Learning, was mentioned on several occasions. The Ministry explained that, with a view to encouraging lifelong learning, incorporating additional learning achievements (including non-degree programmes) will be part of future developments of the NQF, linked to the EQF.

The Verification Committee stresses the importance of this issue because of the 'external' perspective of an NQF, which aspires to include all learning achievements. The qualifications framework should be expanded to include certificates issued upon completion of shorter study programmes that do not lead to full degrees.

**5.3.8.** The honours programme is a noteworthy development and the Committee understands the desire not to be too explicit or prescriptive about its place in the framework at this time. However, in due course the framework should ensure that those who complete the programme receive appropriate recognition.

**5.3.9.** Another issue raised was the actual use of learning outcomes within the institutions. Institutions appear to be still in the process of absorbing the concept of learning outcomes and their detailed application in HE programmes. Because of the paramount role of the HE institutions in the implementation of the NQF, it is important that the institutions give a high priority to the subject of learning outcomes.

## **6. Conclusion**

After studying the compatibility documents and other relevant material, and after discussions with the stakeholders mentioned above, it is the opinion of the Verification Committee that the National Framework of Qualifications in Higher Education in the Netherlands is compatible with the overarching Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.

## 7. References

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- Letter of 3 November 2008 from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science to the the Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) on *verification NQF-HE by external panel of experts.*
- *The Bologna Framework on National Qualifications Frameworks – an Introduction*, with five appendices:
  - *Dublin Descriptors* (Extract from Working Group on Qualifications Framework Report, 2005);
  - *Good practice for the development of national frameworks of qualifications* (Extract from Working Group on Qualifications Framework Report, 2005);
  - *Criteria & Procedures for Verification of Framework Compatibility* (Extract from Working Group on Qualifications Framework Report, 2005);
  - *Recommendations to be considered by countries in undertaking the verification process* (Extract from Qualifications Framework Working Group Report, 2007);
  - *Bibliography*
- *The Higher Education Qualifications Framework in the Netherlands, a presentation for compatibility with the framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. Self-certification document*, draft dated 08 December 2008, Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW), with four annexes:
  - *The framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area;*
  - *Outline for differentiation between the cycles;*
  - *Dutch translation of the Dublin descriptors for the first, second and third cycle exit levels, in the Netherlands referred to as Bachelor, Master and Doctor;*
  - *Diagram of the Dutch education system, also intended as annexe to the Diploma Supplement);*
- *Higher Education in the Netherlands* (part of the Diploma Supplement).
- *Relation Dublin descriptor for Third Cycle and Hora Est VSNU 2004 Descriptor for Doctoral exam*, Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, November 2008
- *Report of the Committee for the Review of the Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), Self Evaluation Report 2007.*
- *Part 2, NVAO Self-evaluation Report*, NVAO, 16 April 2007.
- *Initial Accreditation Framework, The Netherlands*, NVAO, 14 February 2003.
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- *Contribution of VNO-NCW (employers' branch organization), MKB Nederland (employers' branch organisation for SMEs) and AOb (employees' union in the education sector) to the international verification panel*, 2008.

- *Hora est! Position Paper*, VSNU, October 2008.
- *Doorstroom hbo-propedeuse wo-bachelor* Letter from the VSNU to the Ministry of Education of 5 November 2008.
- *Cijfers bachelor-masterstructuur*, VSNU, 2008.
- *Mogelijkheden elders in Nederland voor doorstroom van HBO bachelor naar Universitaire master*, VSNU, 2008.
- *Hoger onderwijs, eerstejaarsstudenten naar vooropleiding en studierichting*.
- *Tabel 1, Enrolment in bachelor's and master's programmes, 2007/2008*, Source: CFI 1- figure-HO.
- *Table 2, Number of programmes in HBO and WO*, Source: Annual report 2006/2007, Education Inspectorate.
- *Table 3, Scale size: higher professional education and research universities (excluding 'green' education)*, Source: OCW Key Figures.
- *Hoger onderwijs, eerstejaarsstudenten naar vooropleiding en studierichting 2007/2008 (voorlopige cijfers)*.
- *OECD Reviews on Tertiary Education, Netherlands*, OECD, 2008.
- *Programme Conference "Future of Dutch Higher Education"*, Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW), The Hague 2008.

## 8. Acronyms

- Aob – Algemene Onderwijsbond / General Union of Educational Personal  
[www.aob.nl](http://www.aob.nl)
- CROHO – Central Register Opleidingen Hoger Onderwijs / Central Register of Higher Education Programmes  
([www.ib-groep.nl/zakelijk/HO/CROHO/Raadplegen\\_of\\_downloaden\\_CROHO.asp](http://www.ib-groep.nl/zakelijk/HO/CROHO/Raadplegen_of_downloaden_CROHO.asp))
- HBO – hoger beroepsonderwijs / higher professional education
- HBO-Raad – The Association of Universities of Applied Sciences  
[www.hbo-raad.nl](http://www.hbo-raad.nl)
- IB-Groep – Informatie Beheer Groep  
[www.ib-groep.nl](http://www.ib-groep.nl)
- ISO – Interstedelijk Studenten Overleg  
[www.iso.nl](http://www.iso.nl)
- KNAW – Koninklijke Nederlandse Academie van Wetenschappen / The Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences  
[www.knaw.nl](http://www.knaw.nl)
- LSVB – Landelijke Studenten Vakbond / National Students' Union  
[www.lsvb.nl](http://www.lsvb.nl)
- MKB-Nederland – employers' branch organisation for SMEs  
[www.mkb.nl](http://www.mkb.nl)
- Nuffic – Nederlandse Organisatie voor Internationale Samenwerking in het Hoger Onderwijs / Netherlands Organisation for International Cooperation in Higher Education, also the Dutch ENIC/NARIC  
[www.nuffic.nl](http://www.nuffic.nl)
- NVAO – Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie / the Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO)  
[www.nvao.net](http://www.nvao.net)
- OCW – Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap / Ministry of Education, Culture and Science  
[www.ocw.nl](http://www.ocw.nl)
- Paepon – Platform van Aangewezen / Erkende Particuliere Onderwijsinstellingen (umbrella organization for all qualitative privately funded education)  
www.
- VNO-NCW – The Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers  
[www.vno-ncw.nl](http://www.vno-ncw.nl)
- VSNU – Vereniging van Universiteiten / Association of Universities in The Netherlands  
[www.vsnu.nl](http://www.vsnu.nl)
- WO- wetenschappelijk onderwijs / research-oriented education

## Appendix 1

### Source: Compatibility Document for The Netherlands

#### Assessment criteria of the accreditation framework, HBO and WO profiles

The HBO and WO orientations are assessed on the basis of five standards from the accreditation framework (cf. table).

#### Assessment criteria from the accreditation framework for HBO and WO orientation

Theme	Standard	Criterion
Objectives	Orientation Higher professional education (HBO) / Academic higher education (WO)	<p>The final qualifications of the programme correspond to the following descriptions of HBO and WO Bachelor's and Master's programmes:</p> <p><b>HBO:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– the final qualifications are derived in part from occupation profiles and/or professional competences drawn up by (or discussed with) the relevant occupational field, and/or any applicable national or international statutory requirements for the profession;</li> <li>– holders of HBO Bachelor's degrees have obtained the qualifications for the level of starter professional practitioner in a specific occupation or linked spectrum of occupations for which a HBO degree is either required or would be of use;</li> <li>– holders of HBO Master's degrees have obtained the qualifications for the level of independent and/or management level professional practitioner in an occupation or spectrum of occupations, and have reached the level needed to work in a multi-disciplinary environment in which a HBO degree is either required or would be of use.</li> </ul> <p><b>WO:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– the final qualifications are derived from the requirements of scientific disciplines, international scientific practice and – where applicable for specific programmes – relevant practice in the future occupational field;</li> <li>– holders of WO Bachelor's degrees have obtained the qualifications to allow admission to at least one subsequent WO course of study at the Master's level and to the labour market;</li> <li>– holders of WO Master's degrees have obtained the</li> </ul>

		<p>qualifications to carry out independent scientific research or to resolve multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary issues in professional practices for which a WO degree is required or would be of use.</p>
Programme	<p>Higher professional education (HBO) / Academic higher education (WO) requirements</p>	<p>The programme meets the following criteria for HBO or WO programmes:</p> <p><b>HBO:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– the knowledge of students is developed through specialised literature, course material derived from professional practice and through interaction with professional practice and/or (applied) research;</li> <li>– the programme can be shown to be linked to current developments in the field of study/discipline;</li> <li>– the programme guarantees the development of professional skills and can be shown to be linked to current professional practice.</li> </ul> <p><b>WO:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– the knowledge of students is developed through interaction between the educational programme and scientific research within the relevant disciplines;</li> <li>– the programme is in line with developments in the relevant scientific discipline(s) through its demonstrable links with current scientific theories;</li> <li>– the programme guarantees the development of skills in the field of scientific research ;</li> <li>– where applicable, programmes have demonstrable links with the current practice of the relevant occupations.</li> </ul>
Programme	Intake	<p>In terms of its form and content, the programme is in line with the qualifications of incoming students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <b>HBO</b> Bachelor’s programmes: VWO, HAVO, Associate degree programmes, middle-management courses or specialised training (WEB) or comparable qualifications as demonstrated in admission tests;</li> <li>– <b>WO</b> Bachelor’s programmes: VWO, HBO propaedeutic year or comparable qualifications as demonstrated in entrance exams;</li> <li>– HBO and WO Master’s programmes: Bachelor’s degree and possibly (content-based) selection</li> </ul>

Programme	Duration	<p>The programme meets the formal requirements regarding the study load of the curriculum:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– HBO Bachelor’s programmes: 240 credit points</li> <li>– WO Bachelor’s programmes: as a rule, 180 credit points</li> <li>– HBO Master’s programmes: 60 credit points minimum</li> <li>– WO Master’s programmes: 60 credit points minimum, depending on the programme</li> </ul>
Staffing	<p>Higher professional education (HBO) / Academic higher education (WO) requirements</p>	<p>The programme meets the following criteria regarding the use of staff in HBO and WO programmes:</p> <p><b>HBO:</b></p> <p>A major part of the course is given by staff who link the programme to professional practice</p> <p><b>WO:</b></p> <p>A major part of the course is given by researchers who contribute to the development of the field of study</p>

## Appendix 2

### Relation Dublin descriptor for Third Cycle and Hora Est VSNU 2004 Descriptor for Doctoral exam

Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, November 2008

Qualifications that signify completion of the third cycle are awarded to students who:

Dublin descriptor	Hora Est descriptor
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• have demonstrated a <i>systematic understanding</i> of a field of study and mastery of the skills and methods of research <i>associated with that field</i>;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the successful candidate has acquired and worked with a <i>substantial body of knowledge</i> which, at the very least, embraces the principles and methods of international academic practice and of theorisation, methodology and study <i>in the discipline concerned</i>;</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• have demonstrated the ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial <i>process of research with scholarly integrity</i>;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the successful candidate is able to exercise <i>social responsibility in conducting, applying and making use of their own research</i>.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• have made a contribution through <i>original</i> research that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work, some of which merits national or international refereed publication;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the successful candidate has made an <i>original</i> contribution to academic research of a quality which stands up to peer review at the level usual in the Netherlands;</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• are capable of critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of <i>new and complex ideas</i>;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the successful candidate possesses the ability to design and implement a <i>substantial project for the purpose of developing new knowledge</i>;</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• can <i>communicate</i> with their peers, the larger scholarly community and with society in general about their areas of expertise;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the successful candidate is able to <i>communicate</i> knowledge and methods pertaining to their discipline or specialism in an effective way;</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• can be expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural <i>advancement in a knowledge based society</i>.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the successful candidate has demonstrated their ability to apply the academic methods used in the discipline concerned <i>for developing, interpreting and putting into practice new knowledge</i>;</li> </ul>