

Reservoirs and rapids

Annual Report 2008

Summary

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Foreword

In 2008, NVAO processed a total of 859 Dutch and Flemish applications, versus 770 the previous year and 503 in 2006.

The number of applications from the Netherlands was overwhelming: 573 accreditation applications, mainly from research universities, and 114 applications for initial accreditation, three-quarters of which was from universities of applied sciences. In addition, ten applications were processed involving research master's programmes and extended master's programmes. Applications from Flanders also reached cruising speed: a total of 159 applications for existing programmes and three initial accreditations were processed.

The pressure to complete the processing of all the applications within the procedural timeframe became so intense that in September, NVAO had to take the decision not to accept any more applications for initial accreditation in the Netherlands and to accelerate the processing procedures for the existing accreditations. This meant that the programmes concerned received a provisional decision with which the statutory accreditation term in the Central Register of Higher Education Programmes (CROHO) could be modified. The usual 'intended decision' with a substantiated assessment was issued in the first months of 2009, subsequently followed by the 'final decision'.

In international terms, 2008 was also an important year. NVAO was one of only three European quality assurance agencies to be included on the European Register, while its activities for the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and from March also for the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education increased in scope.

Special attention was paid to activities arising from the specific demands and assignments from the Dutch and Flemish governments. For example, the national qualifications frameworks of the Flanders and the Netherlands were assessed, in the Netherlands Associate Degrees in the 'teaching' discipline were assessed and preparations were made for the assessment of Flemish higher professional education (HB05) and the validation of the Flemish qualifications structures in 2009.

In addition, 2008 was marked by the development of the accreditation system itself, particularly the preparations for the next phase of the system. Continuous, extensive consultation took place between governments, audit committees, pilot institutions, the Dutch and Flemish umbrella organizations and student associations in the higher education sector in order to take the next step together. In the autumn of 2008, pilots were conducted with nine Dutch and Flemish higher education institutions and various observers, including the Education Inspectorate, to optimise the 'institutional audit' and 'limited programme assessment' instruments. Consultations with all the stakeholders about the pilots generally demonstrated a broad support base for the new model and the newly designed frameworks.

NVAO can look back with satisfaction on this pilot phase (and the newly designed accreditation system of the spring of 2009). The fact that it was possible to first test the design of this new system had significant benefits and, in the opinion of NVAO, a mature and fully-fledged new system has been delivered.

The activities as a whole demanded great commitment on the part of panel members and NVAO staff. The pressure of work was high and on the Dutch side, the budget proved too tight to complete all the tasks within the set timeframes.

Until the end of 2009 – and in Flanders until the end of 2012 – NVAO will continue to process many applications on the basis of the current system. And we are looking forward to it. Every application leads to new insights and a greater quality awareness of institutions, programmes, organizations and students in the (international) higher education sector. An accreditation system can only function well when all parties recognise its importance and are willing to invest in it. This applies now and it will definitely apply to the future system of institutional audits and programme assessments. NVAO would therefore like to thank the Dutch and Flemish higher education institutions, programmes, umbrella organizations, students, quality assurance agencies, evaluation bodies and panel members for the way in which they have immersed themselves over the past years in the accreditation system of the Netherlands and Flanders.

Karl Dittrich
Chair

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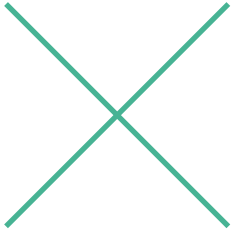
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Chapter

1

Reservoirs and rapids



Looking at it positively, it shows a high degree of innovation, strength and creativity. If you want to look at it negatively, it demonstrates a continuing quest to find new niches to steal students from one another.

In 2008, NVAO had to pull out all the stops in order to process the large numbers of applications for accreditation and initial accreditation. Moreover, the organisation is receiving increasingly more requests from both governments to perform supplementary tasks in the area of quality assurance. On top of that, we have the development of the second phase of the accreditation system and a growing role at the international level. All in all, it will be clear that NVAO was extremely busy in 2008. Chair Karl Dittrich and Vice Chair Guy Aelterman draw up the balance sheet.

In terms of work load, 2008 was perhaps the busiest year NVAO has had, says Karl Dittrich: 'On the one hand, Flanders is in full flow, on the other, we in the Netherlands are being confronted by a reservoir of programmes that were assessed in 2007 but which we received in 2008. And the flow of new programmes remains incredibly large.'

The reservoir of accreditation applications was caused by the government's decision to force the research universities to have all programmes assessed and accredited within four years. 'Because the process was new, increasingly more assessments were pushed onto the back burner,' according to Dittrich. 'This means we also receive the reports later. Large numbers are involved: I think that last year we accredited some 480 research university programmes. In some weeks we even processed 30 to 40 programmes.'

According to Guy Aelterman, not only the quantity was an issue, but also the complexity of the programmes. 'Some of the dossiers were problematic, like the teacher training programmes and the nursing programmes in Flanders. This makes the principle of hearing both sides that much more difficult. Flanders introduced a new law that the teacher training programmes had to implement. In Flanders, assessing the level of programmes is more difficult than it is in the Netherlands. The institutions are struggling with it and also for us it is quite a task to get a clear picture of the situation.'

New programmes

The situation for new programmes differs greatly in the two countries. In Flanders, NVAO has received far fewer applications than in the Netherlands. 'This mainly has to do with the fact that our Minister of Education is working on a rationalisation,' says Aelterman. 'This is the reason that the institutions decided within their umbrella organisations not to make any new proposals for the time being.'

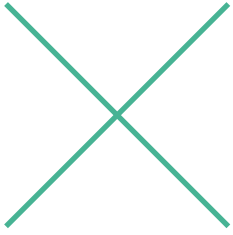
In the Netherlands, on the other hand, NVAO is confronted by a large number of institutions that desire to commence new programmes. How can this be explained? Dittrich: 'You can see this in two ways. Looking at it positively, it shows a high degree of innovation, strength and creativity. If you want to look at it negatively, it demonstrates a continuing quest to find new niches to steal students from one another.' Aelterman also sees a reason in the foreign policy of the Netherlands: 'Students were no longer able to obtain a visa if the programme was not accredited. This also played a role.'

Additional tasks

The Flemish and Dutch governments turn increasingly to NVAO regarding developments in the education sector for which quality has to be monitored. In the Netherlands, for example, this involves the short duration programmes (the so-called Associate Degrees). In 2008, the third portion of applications was received, focused on teaching support. In the year to follow, a large-scale task will be added, focused on in-school training. This is once again a mode of teacher training that needs to be assessed separately.

Flanders has the equivalent of the associate degree with the so-called higher professional education level 5 (HBO-5) programmes. 'The difference is that we now already have several programmes that need to be converted into HBO-5 programmes,' says Aelterman. 'This means that they need to undergo a kind of initial accreditation. This is also an important task in the social context, given the great demand for this type of programme.'

Another new task arises from the classification structure that the Flemish government wishes to introduce. Each programme has to be assigned a place in this structure, and NVAO has been given the job of validating this assignment. 'And in addition we have a few other tasks,' Dittrich continues. 'On the one hand, this is good, the governments are turning to us when quality issues are concerned. But on the other hand, these additional tasks do distract us from our primary duties.'



When I look at what our current role is in this phase of higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders, I don't think we could have developed something any better.

This can sometimes lead to deadlines not being met and on occasion to dissatisfaction at institutions. Sometimes we look at each other and say: is this really what we want?'

New accreditation system

In 2008, NVAO prepared itself for the introduction of a new system in which a shift would take place towards institutional audits. An extensive procedure that required great effort from all stakeholders, particularly NVAO. Dittrich is, however, enthusiastic about the outcomes: 'When I look at what our current role is in this phase of higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders, I don't think we could have developed something better. Of course, research universities claim that it is all unnecessary. But you also have to look at the political situation and the demand from students as well as from the labour market for programme assessments. If you add this up and also look at international developments, I believe we have developed a system that can easily withstand the test of criticism and that can certainly be maintained for six years.'

An important objective of the new system is the reduction of bureaucracy and the pressure of work surrounding accreditation. Although both gentlemen believe that this objective will be realised, Aelterman would like to add a nuance: 'I think that bureaucracy is also created in part because some programmes and institutions are led by fear. Institutions or programmes in which people truly know what they are doing are sometimes actually pleased to enter into a discussion about quality. It thus has a lot to do with a feeling of uncertainty about the initial phase of something new.'

Flanders still has three years. Aelterman: 'If we still have the same Minister of Education after the elections in June 2009, this will mean continuity. If we get a new Minister, it will in any case take a year before there is any new legislation. But institutions are already thinking about how they can best perform institutional audits. The expectation is that the approach will not be too different to that in the Netherlands.'

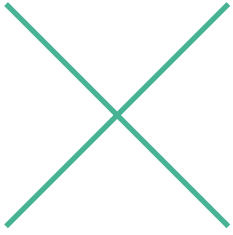
International developments

NVAO is playing an increasing role at the European level. It has a major advantage, says Dittrich: 'We are the only binational accreditation organisation in the world. This has allowed us to acquire a special position in our international context. People often look at NVAO, as a model for new developments, for example. Several countries follow what we do precisely and they hope that all documents about our new system will soon be available in English translation. We are an attractive partner for cooperation.'

Aelterman believes that NVAO tends to be prepared to adopt the decisions of its European sister organisations: 'On the one hand, we are strict in our accreditations. I know of no other country that is as strict as the Netherlands, where a programme has to cease if it is not accredited. On the other hand, our legislation is liberal. We readily accept a good accreditation. As long as the programme is accredited by a respected quality assurance agency we believe that we can take this as our basis. The majority of Western European countries have not yet reached this point.'

Despite these positive developments, there is still a lot of work to be done in the international context. 'We now have a network of quality assurance agencies that recognise one another but the programmes and institutions are still making insufficient use of this network', Aelterman continues. 'If a student has been awarded a bachelor's degree by a programme that has been accredited by one of our sister organisations, the institutions should immediately see that they are receiving quality. On this basis they could establish a network of institutions with which to cooperate. This also applies to the business community. We should work on this in the years ahead.'

Despite all efforts, student mobility is not really increasing, Dittrich believes: 'If I am interpreting the figures correctly, student mobility first showed a downturn and is now moving upwards again. This has to do with the conversion to the bachelor's-master's system in which everyone tried to fit their existing programmes into the new system. This left very little room for true internationalisation and student mobility. The programmes were often overloaded, which meant that students were more likely not to take up the opportunity to spend time abroad. This trend is now slowly reversing.'



We are the only binational accreditation organisation in the world. This has allowed us to acquire a special position in our international context.

Quality awareness

NVAO has been officially performing its duties since 2005. What impact has this had on programmes and educational institutions? Is quality awareness growing? 'I would dare to say unequivocally yes,' says Dittrich. 'In the many reports that have been written about us, the conclusion is consistently that this system has led to greater quality awareness. This is mainly because the system of quality assurance appears on the agenda more frequently.'

Aelterman also sees other positive effects: 'Individual lecturers see an enormous amount of added value in the writing of self-reflections. Moreover, the system used puts forward a number of fundamental questions, for example, about the type of lecturers you need for a professional master's programme.'

Challenges

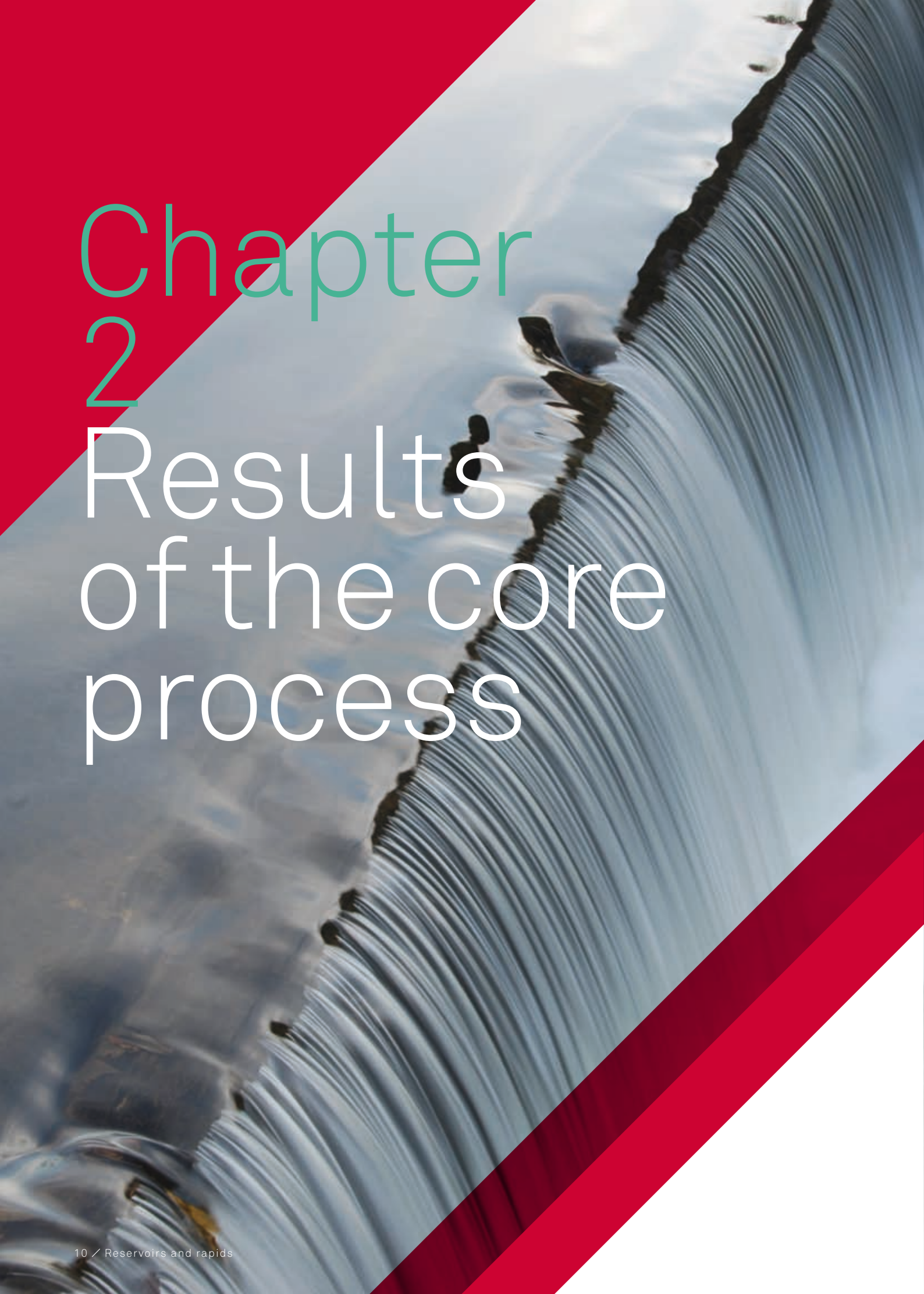
In answer to the question of what major challenges NVAO will be facing in the time ahead, Dittrich first mentions the introduction of the new system: 'By far the most important challenge.' Aelterman underscores this but adds that most of the work has already been done: 'Mentally, it has been accepted. What we are dealing with now is mainly its implementation.'

Another challenge is the increasing diversity of programmes and institutions. This gives rise to questions about the definition of training, Aelterman believes: 'How are we going to deal with this in the future without becoming overly stringent or rigid? How can we productively shape cooperation with foreign programmes? What should we do with the diversity in programme formats like distance learning versus face-to-face teaching? Or with mixed organisations like companies that work together with educational institutions? This represents a great challenge.'

Politics

In conclusion, Dittrich notes that politicians can keep their distance because quality assurance is being handled in a serious manner. 'This is a good thing for the institutions and the political arena alike. They do not have to respond to incidents, they can assume that there is an organisation that is at least keeping a close eye on generic quality. I believe we have succeeded in creating a basis of trust on the part of the institutions regarding the political arena, because we can stand firm that what we have seen is up to standard. I believe this is a good message to be sending to politicians.'

And mutual cooperation? 'Binational cooperation demands significant investment in each other,' says Dittrich. 'With the Taalunie, we are the only organisation that can show this over a period of years. Yes, sometimes there is tension, but time and again we manage to remove the sting.' Aelterman has the final word: 'For the time being we are doing a lot better than Fortis!'



Chapter 2 Results of the core process

2.1 / Accreditation

The total number of accreditation applications rose again in 2008. In the year under review, NVAO processed a total of 732 accreditation applications (573 from the Netherlands and 159 from Flanders) versus 646 applications in 2007; 378 in 2006; 371 in 2005 and 232 in 2004.

2.1.1 / The Netherlands

In 2008, NVAO delivered 564 positive accreditation decisions for the 573 Dutch programme accreditation applications. The majority of the positive decisions (338) involved research university programmes.

Because of the great number of applications, the pressure to complete all the procedures within the procedural timeframe became so intense that in September, NVAO had to take the decision not to accept any more applications for initial accreditation in the Netherlands and to accelerate the processing procedures for the existing accreditations. This meant that the programmes concerned received a provisional decision with which the statutory accreditation term in the Central Register of Higher Education Programmes (CROHO) could be modified. The usual 'intended decision' with a substantiated assessment was issued in the first months of 2009, subsequently followed by the 'final decision'.

This even led to questions being put in the Lower House regarding the failure of NVAO to meet the statutory procedural timeframes. In his answer, Minister Plasterk of Education, Culture and Science stressed the necessity of observing procedural timeframes, but he also pointed to the reservoir of programmes that needed to be assessed in 2008.

2.1.2 / Flanders

In Flanders, a total of 159 accreditation applications were processed in 2008, with 153 of the programmes receiving a positive assessment. Over one hundred applications were received by NVAO in November and December 2007, at the same time as the Dutch accreditation applications. Across the board, the Flemish accreditation applications were processed with only a minor overrun of the procedural timeframe.

The slight delay in the processing of the Flemish applications was mainly caused by the profusion of Dutch dossiers. The applications with a completion time of more than six months were those applications requiring supplementary questions (for example, about distinctive quality features) or hearings.

The applications with a completion time of more than 11 months were those applications for which a supplementary assessment was requested. In 2008, the average completion for handling applications without any special procedures was four months and two weeks.

2.1.3 / Distinctive (quality) features The Netherlands

In the Netherlands, the assessment of 'distinctive features' is divided into assessing 'distinctive features' and assessing 'distinctive quality'. When assessing 'distinctive features', 'realisation' and 'distinguishing nature' are the starting points. Programmes and quality assessment agencies (VBIs) can make agreements beforehand regarding the essential aspects in which this is demonstrated and assessed. NVAO validates the system and method used by the quality assessment agencies. The quality criterion 'distinctive quality' involves the excellence of a particular standard. .

In 2008, NVAO awarded a distinctive feature to the Dutch bachelor's programmes (professional orientation) Real Estate of the Hanzehogeschool Groningen and Media and Entertainment Management of the NHTV international university of applied sciences in Breda.

In addition, NVAO awarded three programmes a 'distinctive quality feature' last year: the bachelor's programmes (professional orientation) Real Estate of the Hanzehogeschool Groningen; Media and Entertainment Management of the NHTV international university of applied sciences in Breda and seven standards of the Nanoscience master's programme (academic orientation) of the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen.

In the Netherlands, distinctive quality features and distinctive features have both been awarded a total of nine times.

Flanders

In 2008, NVAO awarded distinctive quality features to a total of five Flemish professionally oriented bachelor's programmes: the Bachelor in Midwifery of the Arteveldehogeschool in Ghent; the Bachelor of Education: secondary education of the XIOS Hogeschool in Limburg; the Bachelor of Education: nursery school teaching of the EHSAL, European university college in Brussels; and the Bachelor of Communication Management and Bachelor of Journalism of the Katholieke Hogeschool Mechelen.

To date, distinctive quality features have been awarded a total of seven times in Flanders.



2.2 / Initial accreditation

2.2.1 / The Netherlands

In 2008, 114 applications for the initial accreditation of programmes were processed in the Netherlands (2007: 102; 2006: 91 and 2005: 59). Some 78 percent (89) of the Dutch applications for initial accreditation resulted in positive decisions in the year under review.

Notable applications were the joint bachelor's programme of the University of Amsterdam and the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Learning and Innovating master's programme and the bachelor's programme (academic orientation) of the NHTV. There were only slight differences in the assessments of the programmes of publicly and privately funded institutions. Eighty percent of withdrawn applications came from the higher professional education sector.

2.2.2 / Flanders

In 2008, NVAO received 12 Flemish applications for initial accreditation and three were processed (2007: 9 and 2006: 13). Five of these were applications from (non-statutory) registered institutions. Three applications were assessed positively; two applications from (non-statutory) registered institutions were assessed negatively and withdrawn. Seven Flemish applications for the initial accreditation of programmes were still being processed at the end of 2008.

Notable new applications were received for programmes in medical specialisations: four collective applications, each with some thirty specialisations. These applications are still being processed.

2.3 / Research master's and extended master's programmes

2.3.1 / Research master's programmes

Research master's programmes are aimed at preparing talented students for high-quality research careers within universities as well as in the private and public sectors. The programmes are provided by and are the responsibility of qualified researchers who have access to excellent research environments. The Royal Netherlands Academy for Arts and Sciences (KNAW) that has appointed authoritative scientists to international committees in all scientific fields, advises NVAO.

In 2008, 6 applications were processed (2007: 5; 2006: 10 and 2005: 27), all of which were given a positive decision and recommendation (2007: 5; 2006: 7 and 2005: 17). Since the summer of 2003, NVAO has dealt with a total of 169 research master's programmes, of which 130 programmes received a positive decision and recommendation.

2.3.2 / Extended master's programmes

Since 2003, Dutch research universities can submit applications for certain 2-year master's programmes, entitling students to financial aid. In this respect, at the request of the State Secretary for Education, Culture and Science, NVAO has drawn up two protocols. One protocol is for specific programmes in the field of comparative international law and programmes in the field of language and culture with a particularly difficult script. The second protocol applies to other academic master's programmes that desire to extend an existing programme from one to two years. Several years ago, the Higher Education and Research Act (WHW) was amended; subsequently, arts, science, technology and agriculture programmes have to demonstrate that two-year curricula are necessary, as these programmes no longer have special rights under the amended Act.

In 2008, four applications for the assessment of extended master's programmes were processed (2007: 8; 2006: 11 and 2005: 1). Three of these applications were assessed positively (2007: 8; 2006: 4 and 2005: 1).

2.4 / Appeal procedures

On 23 July 2008, the Administrative Jurisdiction Division of the Council of State ruled in two cases regarding appeals lodged by an institution. In the one case, the Division upheld the appeal and set aside the decision of NVAO. NVAO will make a new decision after appeal. In the other case, the Division dismissed the appeal and endorsed the decision of NVAO. An important development is that the Division found the setting up of a verification committee as such to be legitimate.

2.5 / Tables

2.5.1 / Overview

Total number of applications processed

Completed as of 31 December

	2008	2007	2006	2005	2004	2003
> Netherlands						
accreditation	573	523	336	371	232	-
> Initial accreditation	114	102	91	59	35	5
> Research master's	6	5	10	27	78	35
> Extended master's	4	8	11	1	-	-
> Flanders						
accreditation	159	123	42	-	-	-
> Initial accreditation	3	9	13	3	-	-
Total	859	770	503	461	345	40

Total number of withdrawn applications

- > 2008: 28 (2 accreditation applications, 24 initial accreditation applications and 2 extended master's programme applications);
- > 2007: 27 (5 accreditation applications, 22 initial accreditation applications and research master's programme applications);
- > 2006: 48 (8 accreditation applications, 31 initial accreditation applications, 3 research master's programme applications and 6 extended master's programme applications). Three applications were considered inadmissible;
- > 2005: 39 (14 accreditation applications, 15 initial accreditation applications and 10 research master's programme applications);
- > 2004: 37 (2 accreditation applications and 35 initial accreditation applications);
- > 2003: 2 (2 initial accreditation applications).

2.5.2 / The Netherlands

Dutch applications processed in 2008

Completed as of 31 December

	Total	Positive	With-drawn	Negative	Report not approved
> Economics	108	106	-	1	1
> Behaviour and Society	72	70	1	1	-
> Health Care	34	30	1	-	3
> The Arts	45	45	-	-	-
> Agriculture (and the Natural Environment)	4	4	-	-	-
> Natural Sciences	123	123	-	-	-
> Education and Teacher Training	13	13	-	-	-
> Law	4	4	-	-	-
> Language and Culture	84	84	-	-	-
> Technology	86	85	-	-	1
Total	573	564	2	2	5
> Research Universities (WO)	343	338	1	-	4
> Universities of Applied Sciences (HBO)	203	201	-	1	1
> Privately funded institutions	27	25	1	1	-
Total	573	564	2	2	5
> Bachelor's (professional orientation)	205	202	-	2	1
> Master's (professional orientation)	14	14	-	-	-
> Bachelor's (academic orientation)	139	139	-	-	-
> Master's (academic orientation)	215	209	2	-	4
Totaal	573	564	2	2	5

Dutch initial accreditation applications processed in 2008

Completed as of 31 December 2008

	Total	Positive	With-drawn	Negative (with appeal)
> Building Engineering	-	-	-	-
> Economics	40	31	9	-
> Behaviour and Society	21	13	8	-
> Health Care	13	13	-	-
> The Arts	1	1	-	-
> Agriculture and Rural Environment	-	-	-	-
> Education and Teacher Training	13	12	1	-
> Law	6	5	1	-
> Language and Culture	6	4	2	-
> Technology	5	3	2	-
> Natural Sciences	9	7	2	-
Total	114	89	25	-
> Research Universities (WO)	30	25	5	-
> Universities of Applied Sciences (HBO)	47	36	11	-
> Privately funded institutions	37	28	9	-
Total	114	89	25	-
> Bachelor's (professional orientation)	45	34	11	-
> Master's (professional orientation)	37	29	8	-
> Bachelor's (academic orientation)	6	3	3	-
> Master's (academic orientation)	26	23	3	-
Total	114	89	25	-

Dutch research master's applications processed in 2008

Completed as of 31 December 2008

	Total	Positive	With-drawn
> Behaviour and Society	4	4	-
> Health Care	1	1	-
> Law	1	1	-
Total	6	6	-
> Research universities	6	6	-
Total	6	6	-

Dutch extended master's applications processed in 2008

Completed as of 31 December 2008

	Total	Positive	With-drawn	Negative
> Natural Sciences	3	3	-	-
> Language and Culture	1	-	1	-
Total	4	3	1	-
> Research universities	2	1	1	-
> Recognized private institutions	2	2	-	-
Total	4	3	1	-



2.5.3 / Flanders

Flemish accreditation applications processed in 2008

Completed as of 31 December 2008

	Total	Positive	With-drawn	Negative	Report not approved
> Biomedical Sciences	1	1	-	-	-
> Veterinary Science	1	1	-	-	-
> Economics and Applied Economics	5	5	-	-	-
> Combined Fields of Study	11	11	-	-	-
> Medicine	8	8	-	-	-
> Theology and Religious Studies and Church Law	-	-	-	-	-
> Political and Social Sciences	9	9	-	-	-
> Psychology and Pedagogical Sciences	5	5	-	-	-
> Law, Notarial Law and Criminology	23	23	-	-	-
> Social Welfare	2	1	-	1	-
> Applied Biological Sciences	16	16	-	-	-
> Applied Sciences	4	4	-	-	-
> Sciences	17	16	-	1	-
> Philosophy and Ethics	-	-	-	-	-
> Health Care	13	11	-	2	-
> Commercial Sciences and Business Administration	19	17	-	2	-
> Education	25	25	-	-	-
Total	159	153	-	6	-

	Total	Positive	With-drawn	Negative	Report not approved
> Research universities	102	100	-	2	-
> University colleges	57	53	-	4	-
> Registered institutions	-	-	-	-	-
> Non-registered institutions	-	-	-	-	-
Total	159	153	-	6	-
> Professionally oriented bachelor's	57	53	-	4	-
> Academically oriented bachelor's	18	17	-	1	-
> Master's	43	42	-	1	-
> Advanced master's	41	41	-	-	-
Total	159	153	-	6	-

Flemish initial accreditation applications processed in 2008

Completed as of 31 December 2008

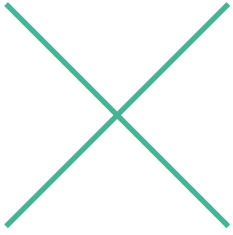
	Total	Positive	With-drawn	Considered inadmissible
> Music and the Performing Arts	1	1	-	-
> Medicine	2	1	-	1
Total	3	2	-	1
> Research universities	1	1	-	-
> University colleges	1	1	-	-
> Registered institutions	-	-	-	-
> Non-registered institutions	1	-	-	1
Total	3	2	-	1
> Professionally oriented bachelor's	1	1	-	-
> Academically oriented bachelor's	-	-	-	-
> Master's	1	-	-	1
> Advanced master's	1	1	-	-
Total	3	2	-	1

A photograph of a waterfall cascading over mossy rocks, serving as the background for the page. A red diagonal stripe runs from the top-left corner towards the center, and a green diagonal stripe runs from the bottom-right corner towards the center. The text is overlaid on these stripes and the waterfall image.

Chapter

3

On the way to a new accreditation system



With the new approach, we want to bring the accreditation of programmes back to the lecturers by ensuring that there is discussion about the content of programmes.

In 2008, NVAO devoted a great deal of time and energy to the preparations for a new accreditation system. The intention is for this system to go into force in the Netherlands in 2010. In Flanders, the current system will remain in force until 2013, but there too the preparations for a new system are in full swing. The major difference between the old and new system is that a new assessment will be introduced, the institutional audit, which will be aimed at assessing the quality assurance at institutions. Mirjam Woutersen and Stephan van Galen, who are both closely involved in the preparations, explain the background.

'Light where possible, heavy where necessary.' These words characterise the new accreditation systems. 'After a positive assessment in an institutional audit, the programmes are assessed to a limited degree,' explains Mirjam Woutersen, policy officer at NVAO. 'The institutional audit is optional. If an institution chooses to forgo this option, the programmes will be subject to a more extensive accreditation procedure. Another difference is that the programmes are no longer obliged to make use of quality assessment agencies (VBIs). The expectation is that the institutions will be able to appoint their panels themselves.'

The new system may also have an impact on the initial accreditation of programmes (TNO). Two variants may be introduced: an extensive and a limited accreditation. An institution that is assessed positively in the institutional audit undergoes a limited initial accreditation procedure. The frameworks for this are based on the accreditation frameworks. This differs from the accreditation procedure in that NVAO appoints the panels for initial accreditation.

External accountability or discussion of content?

Important reasons for the new approach include the aim of reducing red tape, reducing the administrative burden on institutions and a more substantive discussion about quality. Stephan van Galen, also a policy officer, explains the background: 'In Flanders and the Netherlands, we have been working on quality assurance for twenty years already. When converting from the assessment system to the accreditation

system, the emphasis was firmly on external accountability. This made the quality improvement purpose of our external assessments less visible. With the new approach, we want to bring the accreditation of programmes back to the lecturers by ensuring that there is discussion about the content of programmes. The more administrative and policy-related processes are thus assessed at a higher aggregation level. In addition, we want to add impetus to a move for quality improvement at the institution level. We want to ask institutions: what do you actually stand for, how do you want to achieve this and how will you know if you are doing this well? We believe that this will stimulate quality improvement in the higher education sector.'

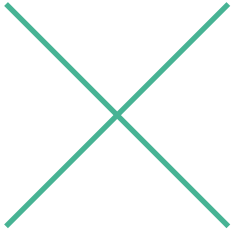
Nuanced assessment

In addition to institutional audits, the new accreditation system also contains several other innovations. An important point is a more nuanced assessment of programmes as a whole, based on a four-point scale. Thus, NVAO is acting in line with the social need for presenting distinctive features, says Woutersen: 'The current framework is made up of themes and standards, in the new system we only have standards. In the current framework, standards are rated from unsatisfactory to excellent, but the themes are only positive or negative. In the new system, not only are the standards are rated from unsatisfactory to excellent, but also the programme as a whole. In the past this was a black or white assessment.'

Improvement period

A final change is the introduction of an improvement period for programmes that are assessed as unsatisfactory. This is new for the Netherlands; Flanders already has such a period. In the current situation, a Dutch programme which receives a negative decision can apply for a new accreditation within two years. However, until the new accreditation procedure is completed with the delivery of a positive decision, the programme may not enrol any new students. In many cases this means the end of the programme. In the new situation, the programme will have the opportunity to rectify flaws without being subject to any immediate consequences.

This improvement period also has to do with trust, which will occupy a more prominent position in the new system. Van Galen: 'Institutional audits create a certain amount of trust regarding the capacity of institutions for self-purification. Reports on institutions that enjoy trust will be subject to limited assessment by us. In addition, we will ask the institutions to indicate their measures for improvement aimed at raising their quality to a higher level.'



Institutional audits create a certain amount of trust regarding the capacity of institutions for self-purification.

Coordination with umbrella organisations

In advance of the proposals for the new system, extensive consultations were conducted with a number of major parties involved. First, the student associations and umbrella organisations were consulted comprehensively about the principles of the new system. The National Union of Students in Flanders (VVS), National Union of Students (LSVb) and the Dutch National Students Association (ISO), The Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (HBO-raad), Council of Flemish University Colleges (VLHORA), the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR), the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) and the Dutch Platform of Recognised Private institutions (PAEPON) were all actively involved, as were the employers' associations MKB-Nederland (the lobby organisation for small and medium sized companies and the Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers (VNO-NCW) in the Netherlands. Van Galen: 'The points of departure were to strive to reduce the administrative and bureaucratic burden and to focus on content in assessments, while retaining a system in which programme assessment was still central. In broad consultation with all parties we reached agreement on a combination of institutional assessment and attention for individual programmes.' The final proposals and the accreditation frameworks were also coordinated with the stakeholders.

International developments

The chosen approach of a combination of an institutional audit and programme assessment is also in line with international developments. To set down these developments, in January 2008 NVAO held a two-day working conference on institutional audits which was attended by a large number of its European sister organisations. 'We were host to the Swiss, the Germans, the Austrians, the English, the Swedes and representatives from Norway,' says Van Galen. 'We explained what we wanted to do, but we especially asked how they had approached this. Every country has its own history and its own mix. On the one hand you see that countries like England where the emphasis is on institutional assessments are moving in the direction of programme assessments. On the other hand, you see that countries like the Netherlands, in which the emphasis was on programmes, are moving in the opposite direction.'



In addition, board members and NVAO staff also actively participated in accreditation procedures abroad. Woutersen: 'We were invited to take part in an accreditation procedure in Switzerland. All Swiss research universities were audited last spring. Most of our board members participated as committee members and several policy officers acted as observers. We were able to see in practice how institutional audits work.'

Institutional audit pilots

All experiences were brought together in a working group that was tasked with developing an amended programme framework and a new framework for institutional audits. The drafts were submitted to the umbrella organisations in the Netherlands and Flanders. Their suggestions, criticism and amendments were taken to heart. Finally, the frameworks were set and preparations for the pilots could commence.

'We aimed to attain a broad reflection of institutions both in the Netherlands and Flanders,' says Van Galen. 'We wrote guidelines for the institutions and guidelines for the committee members. We organised training courses for the process coordinators to hone their auditing skills. We used the input in meetings with the chairs of the panels, students and the secretaries. We even wrote the institution portraits in which we checked if there were side letters and if the decisions revealed any points for special attention. All the stakeholders worked hard on getting the pilots ready to commence by the end of 2008.'

And the outcomes?

The pilots showed that in general people found the framework for the institutional audits to be useful, valuable and workable. The evaluation (that took place in 2009) revealed a number of areas for improvement. The improvements will again be discussed with the institutions involved and the umbrella organisations.

An important issue is whether the administrative burden is actually being reduced. 'Some institutions say: yes, it takes us 30 per cent less work,' says Woutersen. 'But others say that it takes them just as much time. You also see some critical reflections that are very close to the former framework.

We are heeding the criticisms and we are working on modifying the framework for the limited programme assessment. But on the other hand, we also think that it will be a question of becoming familiar with something new. The institutions were used to the old frameworks and they need to acquire expertise with the new ones.'

In Flanders

The expectation is that the new system will go into force in 2010 in the Netherlands and probably in 2013 in Flanders. Three Flemish institutions participated in the pilots. The line of thought there is that in the future people will want to continue to work with the Council of Flemish university colleges (VLHORA) and the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR) quality assessment agencies. When drawing up the legislative proposal, Flanders can make use of the Dutch experiences, says Van Galen: 'For instance, people there will have the possibility to start institutional audits earlier. That will enable Flanders to start immediately with limited programme assessments in 2013. The playing is thus somewhat more open.'



Chapter 4

International: ten years since Bologna

2009 sees the tenth anniversary of the Bologna declaration. In that declaration, a large number of European countries (now 46) took on the obligation of creating a European Higher Education Area by 2010. Improving the harmonisation of European tertiary education would make it easier for European students to study everywhere in Europe. Moreover, it was the intention that after graduation the qualifications acquired would also be recognised everywhere. NVAO is a firm supporter of this European higher Education Area and where possible seeks to cooperate with its sister organisations. In 2008, this cooperation was intensified, due in part to activities surrounding the new accreditation system. Furthermore, in 2008 NVAO devoted a great deal of attention to providing information to students regarding programmes in Europe. NVAO Internationalisation policy officers Frederiks and Axel Aerden explain the outcomes.

Grossroads

In the spring of 2008, the international study choice website Grossroads was launched (see box). Axel Aerden is enthusiastic about the initiative: 'Grossroads provides students and other stakeholders with information about accredited programmes and institutions. Currently, information is available on programmes in five countries: the Netherlands and Flanders, Germany, Poland and Austria. In 2009, this will be expanded to eight and by 2010, to thirteen countries.' Grossroads was developed by the TEAM project, an initiative of the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA). NVAO acted as project coordinator. NVAO decisions can also be accessed via Grossroads.

Joint programmes

Before the European Higher Education Area becomes a reality, hairline fractures need to be repaired. One of these is the way in which the accreditation of international joint programmes is arranged. These joint programmes were earmarked as a priority in the Bologna agreements. NVAO coordinates

activities in this area that are being performed within the ECA TEAM II project.

The partners cooperating in TEAM II want to stimulate joint programmes by making their accreditation easier. Frederiks: 'We have designated five pilot projects in which five joint programmes will be accredited through a single accreditation procedure. Take, for example, a joint programme that is given by institutions in three countries. We will sit down with the three accreditation organisations involved to make agreements about a single procedure that is to be carried out by a single panel. The approach is also aimed at countries that have no mutual recognition procedures. The panel can probably limit its visits to one or two countries. Or, you could invite students and lecturers from the foreign institutions to attend a panel meeting. We need to investigate how this can be organised most efficiently. We are trying to arrive at common frameworks, but there are always requirements that may be specific to one of the countries involved.'

The pilots will run from 2009 to October 2010. The intention is also to involve the recognition authorities in this; after all, this also involves the recognition of qualifications on the basis of accreditation.

Double degrees

Another difficult dossier being tackled by TEAM II involves so-called double degrees. The issue here is the recognition of qualifications awarded by international joint programmes. A conference on this subject was held in Saarbrücken; NVAO made a substantial contribution. Germany has many joint programmes with its neighbouring countries, including the Netherlands. For example, there are programmes in Nijmegen and Münster, or in Osnabrück and Enschede in which part is provided in the Netherlands and the other part in Germany. 'Currently, students are usually awarded a diploma from both institutions,' explain Aerden and Frederiks. 'This means that accreditation is often necessary in both countries. We are checking whether we can make this more efficient, with a common procedure and a single panel. The European Union believes double degrees are in conflict with the idea of Europe and it is encouraging joint degrees: a single degree in the name of all the institutions involved. This is already possible in Flanders. In the Netherlands it is more difficult, but will probably be possible in the course of 2009.'

Verification of higher education qualifications frameworks

Within the framework of the Bologna process, the ministers responsible for higher education accepted the obligation of drawing up national qualifications frameworks in their

countries. These frameworks describe the degrees and diplomas that can be obtained in higher education in the country involved. In order to be able to compare these frameworks with one another, the European Higher Education Area Qualifications Framework was approved.

'To check that each national framework is in line with the European framework, every country has to perform a so-called self-verification procedure,' explains Frederiks. 'The Dutch and Flemish ministers have asked NVAO to set up an international committee to perform this verification. In December 2008, the committee delivered two reports which concluded that the national frameworks of the Netherlands and Flanders meet the European requirements.' Moreover, the reports contain recommendations for the further development of the national frameworks.

The certifications of the Dutch and Flemish qualifications frameworks were published in March 2009 on the Bologna and ENIC-NARIC websites. The Netherlands and Flanders thus are among the six countries that have completed this procedure.

Conferences

In 2008, NVAO organised various international conferences about quality assurance and accreditation: a working conference on institutional audits, a seminar on international benchmarking focused on Dutch and Flemish higher education institutions and a seminar focusing on institutional audits, but with setting up a training programme for experts in Europe as a new development.



Global network

Outside these conferences too, there was a great deal of international contact and many visits back and forth. 'You see that there is increasingly more interest in what is happening here and NVAO is gradually building up quite a reputation,' according to Frederiks. 'Since June 2008, we have provided the secretariat for the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). This is a global network with some 200 members that are quality assurance organisations in the higher education sector. This also leads to interesting contacts, more and more frequently outside Europe. For example, we are in contact with India, China, Thailand and Argentina. Foreign delegations from practically every continent have visited NVAO in recent years. We involved an American accreditation organisation in the assessment of the University College in Utrecht.'

In addition to the secretariat of the INQAAHE, NVAO has provided the secretariat of the ECA since its establishment in 2003. Moreover, NVAO chair Karl Dittrich was chosen as vice chair of the ECA in June. On 5 June 2008, the eleventh ECA Workshop was held in Krakow, Poland. On that occasion, a new agreement was signed by fifteen accreditation organisations from ten European countries.

NVAO vice chair Guy Aelterman has a seat on the board of ENQA. NVAO actively contributed to seminars and meetings organised by the ENQA in 2008. An ENQA platform was set up for internal quality assurance and accreditation organisations. NVAO is part of the steering group of this platform.

Grossroads

The 'Q' of 'Quality' and 'Qualifications' is used as the first letter of Grossroads. The site is a source of information for everyone interested in accredited programmes in Europe. The site currently has information on programmes in eight countries. This will be expanded in the years ahead.

Grossroads is aimed at different target groups like students, employers and institutions themselves. Each of these groups can customise the site and then receive the top-four most frequently asked questions. The Google Maps application is also attractive, allowing students to see which institutions in a

particular country offer accredited programmes. Furthermore, they are also offered general information about studying in the country of their choice, including such matters as visas, grants and the cost of living.



Other international activities

In 2008, NVAO received delegations from countries such as Indonesia, Ethiopia, Russia, Japan and Romania. In almost every case, these were study visits in which NVAO was approached to explain the methodology and procedures it uses.

NVAO made a substantial contribution in May 2008 at the 'Double and Joint Degree Programmes in Cross-Border Regions' conference organised by the University of Saarbrücken. The conference was part of a project in which institutions from a number of German Länder, French departments, Wallonia and Luxembourg are developing programmes together. The conference was focused mainly on the outcomes of these programmes and the possibility of assessing their quality.

In September 2008, under the French Presidency of the European Union, a conference was held on quality assurance. A policy officer of NVAO was asked to act as reporter at this conference. The main subject of the conference was how to involve both research and teaching in quality assurance procedures.

A 17-member Tunisian delegation visited NVAO in November 2008 in connection with participation in the

Tempus project (EvaFor) within the framework of the reorganisation of the Tunisian higher education quality monitoring system. NVAO will be participating in this project until 2009. The aim of the project is to prepare a new assessment and accreditation system for the Tunisian higher education sector by (1) setting down thirty 'evaluators' originating from the research universities and the Ministry of Higher Education and (2), to develop an assessment framework and method.

In November 2008, the final outcomes of the 'European Lifelong Learning Project: Evaluation of the Diploma Supplement' were presented in Budapest at the European QA Forum organised by the E4. In this project, the quality assurance agencies AERES (France) and NVAO (the Netherlands/Flanders) have joined forces with three ENIC-NARIC agencies to work out a methodology for the selective assessment of diploma supplements and align this methodology with the needs/expectations of the stakeholders (EUA, EURASHE, ESU and Business Europe).

Board members and policy officers were invited in 2008 to speak at international meetings held in Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom and at several events organised by the European Commission. In addition, several international publications appeared on the Dutch accreditation systems and mutual recognition.



Chapter 5 Other activities

5.1 / Recognition procedure

In the Netherlands, a new institution can offer an initial bachelor's or master's programme if it has been recognised by the Minister of Education. Recognition means that an institution, with the exception of the right to funding, has the same rights as a publicly funded institution. In 2008, NVAO received two applications for advice related to the recognition procedure. In both cases the advice was positive.

5.2 / Associate degree programmes

In 2008, a pilot was launched aimed at associate degree programmes for teaching support providers. NVAO assessed 35 applications in this regard. For quite some time now, NVAO has been involved in the assessment of applications for associate degree programmes that are part of accredited bachelor's programmes. These are two-year, usually practically oriented programmes. In recent years, two pilots have been performed with applications for associate degree programmes.

5.3 / Contact with stakeholders

NVAO strives to partner with authorities, higher education institutions, quality assessment agencies, student associations and (umbrella) organisations in the Dutch and Flemish higher education sectors and is pleased to learn more about developments within institutions and the programmes themselves. To this end, meetings are organised to share experiences and exchange ideas.

On 20 March 2008, in cooperation with the Council of Flemish University Colleges (VLHORA) and the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR), NVAO organised a Spring Conference in Mechelen. Some 300 people attended, all of whom were involved in the quality assurance of higher education within a programme, in the administration or management of a higher education institution, an umbrella organisation, quality assessment agency or government agency. At the meetings, contributions were made by Clas-Uno Frykholm (from the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education), NVAO chair Karl Dittrich and Dirk Van Damme (senior cabinet secretary to the Flemish Minister of Work, Education and Training Frank Vandenbroucke). In addition, eight workshops took place on various subjects. Jan T'Sas, editor-in chief of *Klasse*, led a forum discussion on developments in the Flemish accreditation system.

On 26 November 2008, a theme day was held at the NHTV in Breda on 'The Labour Market and Education: differences

and similarities'. This day was organised by the Netherlands-Flanders Cultural Treaty Committee in cooperation with NVAO. The focus was on the alignment of higher education with the Flemish and Dutch labour markets.

5.4 / Higher professional education level 5 (HBO-5)

In 2009, Flanders is introducing higher professional education level 5 (HBO-5). The participants in providing HBO-5 programmes are the Centres for Adult Education (CVOs), the current fourth grade professional education Nursing programmes and the university colleges. The new HBO-5 programmes are a combination of education and training on the work floor and comprise 90 to 120 credits. Students who pass the exams are awarded a diploma. From 1 September 2009, existing programmes will be fitted into the new system; in 2010, new programmes will follow suit.

In 2008, NVAO was asked to take charge of the initial accreditation of these programmes. In the year ahead, NVAO will focus on developing specific HBO-5 frameworks and on organising information meetings for the university colleges involved, the Education Inspectorate and the quality assurance agency.

5.5 / Higher Education Register

NVAO is charged with developing and updating the Higher Education Register (HOR - www.hogeronderwijsregister.be and www.highereducation.be). This register contains information on all higher professional education institutions in Flanders and all Flemish bachelor's and master's programmes. NVAO was commissioned by the Flemish government to develop and update the HOR. In the autumn of 2008, a new version of the HOR was developed. This new version consists of an attractive, completely dual-language website and an international compatible database. The database immediately communicates every change to a European database, *Qcrossroads* (www.qcrossroads.eu; cf. Chapter 5) with all data on accredited programmes and/or institutions.

5.6 / Broadening programmes

Two or more programmes registered in the Central Register of Higher Education Study Programmes (CROHO) can, under further conditions, be combined into a single programme without undergoing an initial accreditation procedure. This is known as a planning-neutral conversion. From the time that students can enrol in the broadened programme, enrolment in the original programmes is no longer possible. In 2008, a limited number of requests for planning-neutral conversion were submitted to NVAO and two of these received positive decisions.

Chapter 6 Annexes

6.1 / NVAO Board, Executive Board and Advisory Council

The Board of NVAO consists of a maximum of 15 members. The Chair and a maximum of four other members make up the Executive Board. The board members are appointed for a term of four years by the Committee of Ministers (the Dutch and Flemish Ministers responsible for higher education). The board members have expertise in the field of higher education, the professional practice of higher education, scientific research or the area of quality assurance. The Board decides on the policy, the management regulations, the budget, the annual report and the annual accounts and the decisions that are open to appeal. In addition, the Board provides guidelines for the structure of the organisation, information provision and the financial-economic running of the organisation. The Executive Board directs the organization on a daily basis and is accountable to the Board for its actions.

In 2008, the Executive Board of NVAO was made up by K.L.L.M. Dittrich, PhD (Chair), G.M.A. Aelterman, PhD (Vice Chair), L.J. Klaassen and Prof. G. Langouche.

The board appoints an Advisory Council that provides unsolicited or requested recommendations on general policy. The members of the Advisory Council are appointed for a maximum term of three years and come from the circles of: the Vereniging van Samenwerkende Nederlandse Universiteiten (Association of Universities in the Netherlands, VSNU), the Vereniging van Hogescholen (The Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences, HBO-raad), the Platform van Aangewezen/Erkende Particuliere Onderwijsinstellingen in Nederland (Platform of recognised private institutions in the Netherlands, Paepon), the Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad (Flemish Interuniversity Council, VLIR), the Vlaamse Hogescholenraad (Council of Flemish university colleges, VLHORA), the Interstedelijk Studenten Overleg (Dutch National Students Association, ISO), the Landelijke Studentenvakbond (National Union of Students, LSVb), the Vlaamse Vereniging van Studenten (Flemish Union of Students, VVS) and the Sociaal-Economische Raad van Vlaanderen (Flanders Social and Economic Council, SERV).

6.2 / List of terms and abbreviations

CAOP	Centrum voor Arbeidsverhoudingen Overheidspersoneel Centre for Government Employees' Labour Relations
CDHO	Commissie Doelmatigheid Hoger Onderwijs Committee for Effective Higher Education
CROHO	Centraal Register Opleidingen Hoger Onderwijs Central Register of Higher Education Study Programmes
EBH	Evaluatie Bestuurlijke Hantering Evaluation of Quality Improvement
ECA	European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education
ECTS	European Credit Transfer System
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ENIC	European National Information Centre
ET	Ernstige Tekortkoming Serious Shortcoming
EUA	European University Association
EVCs	Elders verworven competenties Prior learning
HBO-raad	Vereniging van Hogescholen The Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences
HOR	Hogeronderwijsregister Higher Education Register
IB-Groep	Informatie Beheer Groep Information Management Group
Inspectorate	Inspectie van het Onderwijs Education Inspectorate
INQAAHE	International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
ISO	Interstedelijk Studenten Overleg Dutch National Students Association
KNAW	Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences
LET	Langdurig Ernstige Tekortkoming Long-lasting Serious Shortcomings
LSVb	Landelijke Studenten Vakbond National Union of Students
NARIC	National Academic Recognition Information Centre
Nuffic	Nederlandse organisatie voor internationale samenwerking in het hoger onderwijs Netherlands organization for international cooperation in higher education
NVAO	Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders
Paepon	Platform van Aangewezen/Erkende Particuliere Onderwijsinstellingen in Nederland Platform of recognised private institutions in the Netherlands
PNN	Promovendi Netwerk Nederland Netherlands PhD Network Quality assessment agencies
SERV	Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR) / Council of Flemish university colleges (VLHORA) Sociaal-Economische Raad van Vlaanderen Flanders Social and Economic Council

TEEP	Transnational European Evaluation Project
VBI	Visiterende en Beoordelende Instantie Quality assessment agency
VLHORA	Vlaamse Hogescholenraad Council of Flemish university colleges
VLIR	Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad Flemish Interuniversity Council
VSK	Vlaamse Scholierenkoepel Flemish Pupils Association
VSNU	Vereniging van Universiteiten Association of Universities in the Netherlands
VVS	Vlaamse Vereniging van Studenten National Union of Students in Flanders
WHOO	Wet op het hoger onderwijs en onderzoek Higher Education and Research Act
WHW	Wet op het hoger onderwijs en wetenschappelijk onderzoek Higher Education and Scientific Research Act

Colophon

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