



NVAO  INTERNATIONAL

ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

FOR INITIAL ACCREDITATION

JULY 2026



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This assessment framework applies to new study programmes of international higher education institutions.

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1 Introduction

Initial accreditation is an (ex ante) assessment of the potential quality of a new programme. A new programme is a programme that is not officially registered and/or does not have any graduates yet. NVAO bases its initial accreditation decision on an assessment of the potential programme quality by a panel of external, independent experts. The present assessment framework comprises the assessment philosophy, the assessment principle and the assessment procedure to be followed.

I. Assessment philosophy

The assessment process that results in an initial accreditation decision is conducted in accordance with the assessment philosophy, which is founded on a specific operationalisation of the involvement of external, independent experts and on NVAO's Appreciative Approach.

II. Assessment principle

The assessment principle comprises two aspects: on the one hand, the assessment ground underpinning the assessment of the quality of a programme and, on the other hand, the assessment scale and assessment rule applied by the panel for its substantiated judgement regarding the potential quality of the programme.

The quality of a programme is demonstrated by reference to eight quality features. These quality features are the characteristics of a high-quality higher education programme and tie in with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015). They provide higher education programmes with a basis for substantiating quality. For every programme whose quality meets the requirements, the manifestation of the quality features is confirmed.

In addition, the assessment verifies how, on the one hand, internal and external stakeholders and, on the other hand, external and independent experts are involved in the development of the programme and how this involvement will be ensured in the future in a continuous pursuit of quality enhancement.

If applicable, the panel verifies whether the programme meets the regulations governing access to corresponding offices or professions.

III. Assessment procedure

The assessment procedure is coordinated by NVAO. The panel advises the NVAO Board which takes the initial accreditation decision based on the Flemish Higher Education Codex, specifically article II.124/3, 2°.

2 Assessment philosophy

2.1 Operationalisation of the involvement of external, independent experts

In all NVAO accreditation procedures, peer review conducted in an internationally accepted manner is central. To this end, NVAO organises a dialogue between a panel of external, independent experts and the programme being assessed. The panel comprises at least subject expertise, international expertise, professional-field expertise, educational expertise, evaluation expertise and student-related expertise. These areas of expertise are specified in the present assessment framework.

The external experts must also be independent. This means, among other things, that they may not have any interest, either positive or negative, in the outcome and consequences of the assessment, and that over the five years prior to the appointment of the panel they must not have had any connections or ties with the institution. To this end, NVAO's panel members sign a code of deontology in which the incompatibilities for participation in a panel are clearly specified and listed. The code of deontology is published on the NVAO website.

2.2 NVAO's Appreciative Approach

In its assessment of the quality, the panel takes the context and the choices made by the new programme as its starting point. To have this basic philosophy reflected in the assessment process, the panel adopts NVAO's Appreciative Approach. Rather than a quality assurance model, this Appreciative Approach constitutes a philosophy, a mind-set, a style or an attitude that is leading throughout the entire assessment process and in the design of all its components. Through the Appreciative Approach, the focus is placed on "what" is and "what" is possible within the applicable context, without focusing on what should be or substantiating the "how". The latter falls under the autonomy of the institution or programme. NVAO's Appreciative Approach always leaves room for in-depth, critical investigation. In the light of the philosophy of the Appreciative Approach, the programme itself further substantiates the assessment framework wherever possible and necessary.

An open dialogue is a key element of the assessment process. Within the assessment, special attention is paid to what is going well, with an emphasis on the embedding and fostering of successful processes. Nonetheless, the panel brings out and critically examines any lack of clarity or points for attention, with the aim of arriving at a balanced and well-supported judgement.

NVAO's Appreciative Approach therefore does not hinder critical investigation or critical judgement formation, but in doing so relies on dialogue and shared insights.

3 Assessment principle

3.1 Assessment ground

The assessment of the potential quality of the new programme is designed based on four coherent questions:

- What does the programme intend?
- How does the programme want to realise its intentions?
- How will it be established that what was intended has been achieved?
- How does the programme invest in continuous quality enhancement?

These questions determine the scope of the investigation conducted for the purpose of the assessment.

In the light of NVAO's Appreciative Approach, the new programme can respond to the context in which it finds itself. Substantive choices are not questioned but must match the way in which the programme presents itself. The programme involves internal and external stakeholders on the one hand and external and independent experts on the other hand. In addition, it complies with the relevant regulations governing access to certain offices or professions.

The quality of programmes is confirmed in an internationally accepted manner. This means that the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015) are followed. The quality features are a translation of the elements from the ESG that characterise high-quality higher education programmes. However, the quality features are not separate standards that must each lead to a separate judgement.

For every programme whose quality meets the requirements, the manifestation of all the following quality features is confirmed:

1. The programme's learning outcomes constitute a clear and programme-specific interpretation of the international requirements regarding level, content and orientation;
2. The programme's curriculum ties in with the most recent developments in the discipline, takes account of developments in the professional field and is relevant to society;
3. The teaching staff allocated to the programme provide students with optimal opportunities for achieving the learning outcomes;
4. The programme offers students adequate and easily accessible facilities and counselling;
5. The teaching and learning environment encourages students to play an active role in the learning process and contributes to smooth study progress;
6. The assessment of students reflects the learning process and concretises the intended learning outcomes;
7. The programme provides complete and easily readable information on all phases of the study career;
8. Information on the quality of the programme is publicly accessible.

3.2 Assessment scale and assessment rule

Assessment scale

The assessment of the potential quality of the programme prompts one of the following decisions:

- positive initial accreditation decision;
- negative initial accreditation decision.

Assessment rule for the initial accreditation decision

The potential quality of the programme is assessed based on the assessment ground as a whole, whereby the coherent questions are not weighed separately. The decision follows from a holistic and substantiated judgement based on the findings from the investigation conducted.

Positive initial accreditation decision

The potential quality of the programme can be demonstrated based on the assessment ground. Recommendations are never at odds with a positive initial accreditation decision.

Negative initial accreditation decision

With respect to well-defined aspects of the assessment ground, the potential quality of the programme cannot be demonstrated. Any quality deficiency must be explicitly substantiated by reference to the condition(s) that must be met to remedy the deficiency.

4 Assessment procedure

In line with NVAO's Appreciative Approach, all steps in the assessment process are designed appreciatively, from the training of panel members, through the panel's investigation, to the final reporting.

4.1 Preliminary consultations

In the run-up to the formal application, the programme (institution) may hold preliminary consultations with NVAO no later than three months before the possible submission date of the application file, to agree on the following aspects:

- Timing and steps in the procedure, including the planning of the dialogue between the panel and the programme (institution);
- The panel profile and the combination of expertise;
- The drafting of the Information File and the documentation to be submitted;
- The design of the panel's investigation.

4.2 Information File

The programme draws up an Information File that serves a dual purpose:

- Reflecting on its own (planned) educational practice, while ensuring that this reflection is broadly supported;
- Providing the panel with insight into what the new programme intends, how it wants to realise this, how it will be established that what is intended has been achieved, and how the programme invests in continuous quality enhancement.

The Information File pays attention to the context within which the new programme is offered and to the way in which internal and external stakeholders and experts have been involved in the development of the programme and how this involvement will be ensured in the future. If applicable, reference is made to the relevant regulations governing access to certain offices or professions.

The Information File enables the panel to investigate the answers to the four coherent questions.

The Information File is a self-contained document that can be read independently. It comprises a maximum of 15,000 words, excluding the required documentation in annex, as listed in Chapter 5. The specific format and content of the Information File are not prescribed and fall within the autonomy of the programme. Information that is publicly available on the website may be provided via a web link.

4.3 Application

The assessment procedure starts when NVAO receives an application for the initial accreditation of the new programme.

As a procedural requirement, the application must be submitted electronically via the procedural webpage, or in an emergency by email via application@nvaio.org, and must consist of an application letter signed by the board of the institution and the Information File, as described under 4.2. If a panel member so requests, the institution sends a paper version to that panel member.

4.4 Admissibility

NVAO checks the admissibility of the application to verify whether the procedural requirements have been met. If the application is inadmissible, the institution will be informed accordingly within a timeframe of 15 calendar days. Subsequently, the institution must complete the application in consultation with the process coordinator within a timeframe of 30 calendar days. If a complete file is not submitted in time, the application will be declared definitively inadmissible.

4.5 Payment for the procedure

Once the application has been found admissible, the institution will receive a request for full payment of the cost of the initial accreditation. The costs entailed in the work performed by the panel, such as remuneration, travel expenses and overnight accommodation, as well as the process coordination by NVAO and overhead costs are paid by NVAO from this amount.

4.6 Composition of the panel

NVAO appoints the panel that conducts the initial accreditation. A panel consists of a number of experts who are in a position to make a judgement on the (potential) quality of the new programme. To be able to take the context of the programme into account, NVAO always takes the initiative to involve the programme (institution) in the composition of the panel.

A panel comprises a minimum of four members, including a student, and is supported by an NVAO process coordinator and, where applicable, an external secretary. Both do not sit on the panel.

To warrant an objective and fair assessment, the panel must be able to work independently from the programme. All panel members, the secretary and the process coordinator sign a code of deontology to this end.

The panel must be authoritative and, to this end, combines the following types of expertise:

- International expertise is represented on the panel to enable it to verify whether the programme meets what is common internationally in terms of content, orientation and level and, insofar as applicable, whether it meets the requirements that international professional practice sets for graduates;
- Subject expertise focuses on developments in the discipline. A subject expert teaches or has taught within the same or a related programme with the same orientation and contributes to the development of professional practice, the discipline or the field of study;
- Educational expertise refers to recent experience in teaching or educational development at the relevant programme level and to expertise regarding the teaching and learning formats used by the programme;
- Evaluation expertise gives the panel the necessary expertise to assess whether the programme can confirm the quality of education;
- The professional-field expert commands a good overview of the requirements that the professional field sets for graduates;
- Student-related expertise enables the panel to verify whether student-centredness and students' interests are safeguarded in such aspects as information provision for students, student facilities, counselling and student participation. Student experts preferably have experience as a student representative within a programme or institution.

Panel members are still active in their field of expertise, not necessarily in employment, at the time at which the panel is appointed. This also applies to the student on the panel.

NVAO informs the institution of the panel composition. The institution has the right to submit substantiated objections to the composition of the panel within a timeframe of 15 calendar days. In addition, the institution is required to inform NVAO, within that same timeframe, of any information it has regarding the expertise and independence of panel members.

The process coordinator monitors the substantive philosophy of the quality assurance system and the methodology of the procedure and ensures that the panel conducts its investigation in that spirit and in accordance with the Appreciative Approach. To safeguard this, all panel members receive thorough training from NVAO prior to the procedure. This training prepares the panel members for their tasks and responsibilities and trains them in applying the Appreciative Approach.

4.7 Dialogue with the programme (institution)

The panel has at least six weeks to review the Information File and the accompanying documentation.

As part of the panel's investigation, NVAO organises a dialogue between the panel and the programme (institution). The format of this dialogue is agreed upon with the programme (institution) and the panel. Usually, this includes a site visit. A combination of a site visit and online meetings is also possible, for example to speak with certain stakeholders for whom physical travel is difficult.

During one or more preliminary meetings, the panel prepares for the dialogue with the programme (institution). For this dialogue, the schedule of the site visit is designed in such a way that it enables the panel to carry out its assignment. Based on a schedule proposed by NVAO, the panel determines the details of the schedule, which is discussed with the programme (institution). The process coordinator acts as an intermediary between the panel and the programme. Once the final schedule for the dialogue is known, the programme may indicate the positions from which it proposes discussion partners.

The following discussion partners must be involved across the interviews:

- Institutional management;
- Programme leadership;
- (Intended) teaching staff;
- Students enrolled in the new programme, if any, or in a related programme from the institution;
- Representatives from the professional field.

At least one interview takes the form of a dialogue between the panel and students enrolled in the new programme, if any, or in a related programme from the institution.

Considering that the panel may request additional information during the dialogue, the programme features an open timeslot. This also enables the programme (institution) to submit additional documentation to the panel or to schedule additional interviews.

If, during the assessment process, matters arise that could affect the independence of the assessment, stakeholders such as panel members, process coordinators, secretaries, staff of the institution or students may report such matters to NVAO via the complaints procedure available on the website.

4.8 Assessment and assessment report

The investigation conducted by the panel is structured by reference to the four coherent questions from the assessment ground. It should be noted in this respect that the questions need not be addressed separately during the investigation; however, the assessment report that discusses the findings of the panel must allow the reader to answer the questions.

During the dialogue with the programme (institution) and the preceding meeting of the panel, the secretary collects all input from the panel members and draws up a report that constitutes the basis for the assessment report.

In its assessment report, the panel advises NVAO on the quality of the programme as a whole. The final judgement on the two-point scale “positive initial accreditation decision” or “negative initial accreditation decision” is substantiated by reference to the positive and critical elements from the panel’s investigation into the potential quality of the new programme.

The assessment report comprises 15 to 20 pages and is preceded by a concise summary of the findings and the advice of the panel. The assessment report includes the following data:

- The administrative data of the institution and the programme as listed under 5.1;
- The composition of the panel;
- The schedule for the dialogue with the programme (institution);
- An overview of the material studied;
- A list of abbreviations.

The draft assessment report is shared with the panel members within four weeks after completion of the site visit. The process coordinator assesses the internal consistency of the report and the traceability of the advice and, if necessary, proposes adjustments to the panel that clarify the findings or strengthen the substantiation of the advice. After all panel members have approved the contents of the assessment report, the chair of the panel endorses the report for the first time.

The report is then forwarded to the institution. The board of the institution is given 15 calendar days to point out factual inaccuracies and formulate technical remarks. Where necessary, the report is adjusted, after which the panel definitively endorses the assessment report. The panel is

obliged to respond in writing to the board of the institution regarding any substantive factual inaccuracies that have been identified. The endorsed assessment report is submitted to NVAO.

4.9 NVAO initial accreditation decision

NVAO takes an initial accreditation decision within an indicative period of six to eight months following receipt of the application, and forwards a draft initial accreditation decision and the underlying assessment report from the panel to the board of the institution. When drawing up the draft decision, NVAO may ask the institution and/or the panel for additional information, explanations and clarifications. NVAO can take two possible decisions: positive or negative. NVAO may deviate from the advice contained in the assessment report in its decision, stating its reasons for doing so. All of this takes place in accordance with the provisions laid down in the Regulations on Administrative Principles applicable to decision-making by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders.

Before definitively endorsing the initial accreditation decision, NVAO affords the board of the institution the opportunity, within a 15-calendar-day limitation period commencing on the day after receipt, to formulate comments and/or objections to the draft initial accreditation decision and/or the underlying assessment report.

The drafts are adjusted where necessary. NVAO forwards its final initial accreditation decision with the underlying assessment report from the panel to the institution.

The newly recognised programme is deemed to be accredited up to and including the end of the second academic year following the academic year in which the study load determined for the new programme was completed in full for the first time.

4.10 Internal and external appeals

Any draft decision or decision taken by NVAO is open to an internal appeal to NVAO and an external appeal to the Council of State, in accordance with NVAO's Regulations on Administrative Principles. NVAO provides the necessary information for this purpose on its website.

4.11 Publication

After the decision-making procedure, NVAO publishes the decision and the underlying assessment report on its website, in the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR), and forwards both documents to the Flemish Minister of Education in accordance with the Flemish Codex Higher Education.

5 Required documentation

The programme provides a limited number of documents to the panel as an annex to the Information File. NVAO assumes that these are existing documents that are available within the programme or institution and that are not drawn up specifically for the initial accreditation. The documents serve to substantiate and verify the information in the file.

Other material is only necessary if the panel explicitly requests it.

5.1 Administrative data regarding the institution and the programme

The administrative data are included in the application.

Administrative data regarding the institution

- name;
- address, website;
- name, position, telephone number and email address of the contact person.

Administrative data regarding the programme

- the degree, the qualification of the degree and, if applicable, the specification of the degree;
- if applicable, the title that holders of the degree conferred by this programme may use;
- the field of study, part of a field of study or fields of study within which the programme is categorised;
- the majors/specialisations, if any;
- the listing of potential programme routes for working students, full-time/part-time trajectories, day/evening education and different forms of certification;
- the location(s) at which the programme is offered;
- the language of instruction;
- the study load expressed in ECTS credits;
- the programme-specific learning outcomes;
- in the case of an associate degree/EQF level 5 programme or bachelor's programme: the connecting options and potential further education; in the case of a master's programme: the required prior education and admission requirements.

5.2 Required annexes to the Information File

The following verifiable facts are included as annexes to the Information File:

- If available, the domain-specific learning outcomes;
- A schematic overview of the entire curriculum;
- A description of the content of all curriculum components of the first 60 ECTS credits, stating the intended learning outcomes, teaching/learning formats, assessment formats, study material and number of ECTS credits for each component (ECTS sheets);
- A description of the staff: documents that provide insight into the required competencies of the profiles already present and of the intended profiles;
- An overview of contacts with the professional field;
- The investment plan for the entire programme.

5.3 Documents available digitally for the panel's investigation

- Educational vision and policy;
- Assessment policy, staff professionalisation (including HR policy if available) and student counselling;

- Teaching and examination regulations;
- Reports of consultations in relevant committees/bodies;
- Available manuals and study material.

During its investigation, the panel may always request additional information to arrive at a judgement. The panel must always justify such a request. The list of materials studied is included in the assessment report.

Colophon

NVAO dept. Flanders & Luxembourg
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NVAO - Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands, Flanders & Luxembourg
Department of Flanders & Luxembourg
Parkstraat 83
NL - 2514 JG The Hague
info@nvao.org • www.nvao.org