



NVAO • INTERNATIONAL

ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

FOR PROGRAMME ACCREDITATION

JULY 2026





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This assessment framework applies to existing study programmes provided by international higher education institutions.

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1 Introduction

Programme accreditation is the official decision by NVAO that a programme meets the quality and level requirements as set out in this assessment framework.

NVAO bases its accreditation decision on an assessment of the 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 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 on the 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). For every programme whose quality meets the requirements, the manifestation of the quality features is confirmed.

In addition, during the assessment it is examined how, in a continuous pursuit of quality enhancement, the programme ensures the involvement of internal and external stakeholders on the one hand and external, independent experts on the other hand.

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

III. Assessment procedure

The assessment procedure is coordinated by NVAO. The panel advises the NVAO Board which takes the 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 programme as the starting point in its assessment of the quality.

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 always 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 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, any lack of clarity or points for attention are brought to the surface by the panel and critically examined, 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 periodic assessment of programme quality is designed based on four coherent questions:

- What does the programme intend?
- How does the programme realise its intentions?
- How is it 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.

The programme involves internal and external stakeholders on the one hand and external, 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 quality of the programme prompts one of the following three decisions:

- positive accreditation decision;
- positive accreditation decision with limited validity;
- negative accreditation decision.

Assessment rule for the accreditation decision

The 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 of the investigation conducted.

Positive accreditation decision

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

A positive accreditation decision is valid for six years and, if applicable, follows on from the previous accreditation period. In the case of an assessment following an earlier positive accreditation decision with limited validity, the duration of the limited validity is deducted from this period.

Positive accreditation decision with limited validity

The quality of the programme cannot be verifiably demonstrated in relation to clearly specified aspects of the assessment ground. A lack of quality is explicitly substantiated by reference to the condition or conditions that must be met to remedy the shortcoming. In addition to conditions, recommendations may also be formulated.

The period of limited validity is determined in consultation with the programme and takes account of the timeframe within which the programme can meet the conditions. The maximum duration is three years and, if applicable, follows on from the previous accreditation period.

Negative accreditation decision

With respect to well-defined aspects of the assessment ground, the quality of the programme cannot be demonstrated and/or the condition(s) that were attached to an earlier positive accreditation decision with limited validity are not met in the subsequent programme assessment to verify compliance to the condition(s).

The programme loses its accreditation and the board of the institution may not apply for accreditation of the programme for the next six years. The institution should guarantee that already enrolled students can continue their programme through cooperation with another institution.

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 Self-Assessment Report and the documentation to be provided;
- The design of the panel's investigation.

4.2 Self-Assessment Report

The programme draws up a Self-Assessment Report that serves a dual purpose:

- Reflecting on its own educational practice, while ensuring that this reflection is broadly supported within the programme;
- Providing the panel with insight into what the programme intends, how it realises this, how it is established that what was intended has been achieved, and how the programme invests in continuous quality enhancement.

The Self-Assessment Report pays attention to the context within which the programme is offered and to the way in which internal and external stakeholders and experts are involved in the programme. If applicable, reference is made to the relevant regulations governing access to certain offices or professions.

The Self-Assessment Report enables the panel to investigate the answers to the four coherent questions.

The Self-Assessment Report is a self-contained document that can be read independently. It comprises a maximum of 15,000 words, excluding the mandatory documentation in the annex, as set out in Chapter 5. The specific format and content of the Self-Assessment Report 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 programme assessment. As a procedural requirement, the application must be submitted electronically via the procedural webpage, or in an emergency by email via application@nvao.org, and must consist of an application letter signed by the board of the institution and the Self-Assessment Report, as described under 4.2. If a panel member so requests, the institution sends a paper version to that panel member.

Applications are submitted no later than eight months before the current accreditation (if applicable) expires.

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 is 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 assessment procedure. 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 will conduct the programme assessment. A panel consists of a number of experts who are in a position to make a judgement on the quality of the 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 the international professional field 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 developing education at the relevant programme level and to expertise regarding the educational formats used by the programme;
- Evaluation expertise gives the panel the expertise required 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 a student-centred approach and students' interests are considered 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 NVAO's 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 NVAO's Appreciative Approach.

4.7 Dialogue with the programme (institution)

The panel has at least six weeks to review the Self-Assessment Report 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 interviews is also possible, for example to speak with certain stakeholders for whom physical travel is difficult.

The panel prepares for the dialogue with the programme (institution) during one or more preliminary meetings.

The schedule for this dialogue is designed in such a way as to enable 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 is known, the programme may indicate the positions from which it proposes discussion partners.

The following discussion partners must be involved across the interviews:

- Programme management;
- Teaching staff;
- Students enrolled in the programme;
- Alumni and representatives from the professional field.

At least one interview takes the form of a dialogue between the panel and students enrolled in the programme.

Considering that the panel may request additional information during the dialogue, or that the institution may wish to submit additional information, 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 sets out 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 three-point scale "positive accreditation decision", "positive accreditation decision with limited validity" or "negative accreditation decision" is

substantiated by reference to the positive and critical elements from the investigation conducted into the quality of the 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 set out 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 the site visit has been completed. 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 Decision-making

Within an indicative timeframe of six to eight months following receipt of the application, NVAO takes an accreditation decision and forwards a draft accreditation decision and the underlying assessment report of the panel to the board of the institution. NVAO arrives at an accreditation decision based on the panel's assessment report, in accordance with the assessment scale and assessment rules as described under 3.2. When drawing up the draft decision, NVAO may ask the institution and/or the panel for additional information, explanations and clarifications. 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 accreditation decision, NVAO gives the board of the institution the opportunity to formulate comments and/or objections to the draft accreditation decision and/or the underlying assessment report within a 15-calendar-day limitation period, which starts on the day after receipt.

NVAO forwards its final accreditation decision with the underlying assessment report of the panel to the institution.

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 annexes to the Self-Assessment Report. NVAO assumes that these are existing documents that are available within the programme or institution and are not drawn up specifically for the assessment. The documents serve to substantiate and verify the information in the Self-Assessment Report.

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

5.1 Administrative data of the institution and the programme

The administrative data are included in the application.

Administrative data of the institution:

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

Administrative data of the programme:

- the degree and 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;
- any specialisations;
- the listing of any programme routes for working students, full-time/part-time routes, day/evening education and distinct 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 possibilities for progression and potential further programmes; in the case of a master's programme: the required prior education and admission requirements.

5.2 Mandatory annexes to the Self-Assessment Report

The following verifiable facts are included as annexes to the Self-Assessment Report:

- If available, the domain-specific learning outcomes;
- A schematic overview of the full curriculum;
- A description of the content of all programme components, specifying the intended learning outcomes, teaching and work formats, assessment formats, study materials and number of credits (ECTS sheets);
- A description of the staff;
- An overview of contacts with the professional field;
- The investment plan for the full programme.

5.3 Documents digitally available for the panel's investigation

- Educational vision and policy;
- Assessment policy, professionalisation of teaching staff (including HR policy, if available) and study counselling;
- Teaching and examination regulations;
- Reports of meetings in relevant committees/bodies;
- Available handbooks and study materials.

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

Colophon

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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