Initial Accreditation

To obtain accreditation from the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), a new degree programme must successfully complete the initial accreditation procedure. Only after passing this quality assessment may the higher educational institution award the legally protected degrees for the programme.

GENERAL INFO

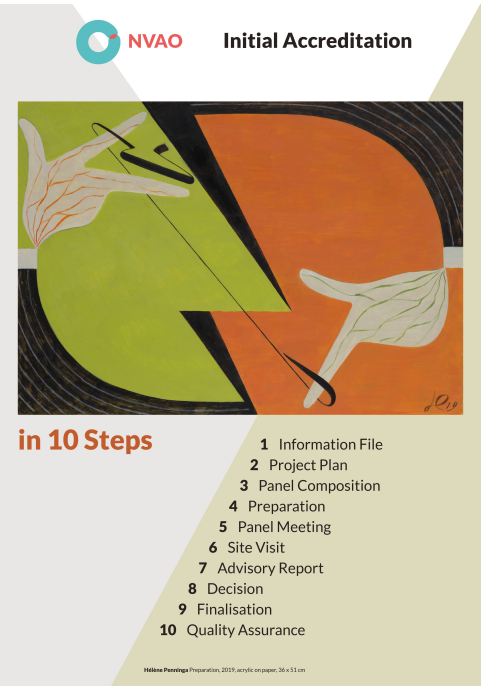
INITIAL ACCREDITATION IN 10 STEPS

The procedure for a new programme differs slightly from that of existing, already accredited programmes. An initial accreditation (TNO) is an assessment of the programme's design. Once accredited, the new programme becomes subject to the regular accreditation cycle.

An NVAO panel of independent experts assesses the quality of the new programme during a site visit to the university or university of applied sciences. A peer discussion forms the basis of the assessment and results in an advisory report.

As the gatekeeper of quality in higher education, NVAO appoints the panel members for the initial accreditation procedure. Institutions may propose candidates for panel membership.

NVAO aims to complete the procedure within six months. With over 20 years of experience in organising TNO procedures, we have developed a streamlined 10-step process. This step-by-step plan outlines the distinct phases that the institution, the panel, and NVAO go through together—from a clearly defined starting point to a conclusion. The result is a thorough and efficient assessment procedure that ensures institutions receive a clear outcome regarding the recognition of their new programme.



INITIAL ACCREDITATION

During the initial accreditation procedure, the panel assesses the programme design submitted by the institution. This plan provides a clear overview of the intended learning outcomes; the structure and organisation of the curriculum; the learning environment and assessment methods; and the teaching staff responsible for delivering the programme. These elements must be

described in detail for at least the first 60 EC of the programme.

Institutions without a positive institutional audit decision must also meet additional quality criteria. In addition, the institution may request the panel to assess specific distinctive features as part of the procedure.

MACRO-EFFICIENCY ASSESSMENT

To receive public funding for a new programme, the institution must apply for a macro-efficiency assessment from the Committee for Efficiency in Higher Education (in Dutch: *Commissie Doelmatigheid Hoger Onderwijs*, CDHO), which advises the Minister of Education, Culture and Science (in Dutch: *Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap*, OCW). The institution may undergo this assessment before, during, or after the initial accreditation procedure. If the minister issues a negative decision, the institution can usually only offer the programme without public funding.

RECOGNITION OF PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS

Private organisations wishing to offer a higher education programme must first be recognised by the Minister of Education, Culture and Science (in Dutch: *Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap*, OCW) as a legal entity for higher education. This recognition is granted following an extensive initial accreditation procedure.

Once approved, these institutions are authorised to award recognised bachelor's and master's degrees and may submit programmes for accreditation directly to NVAO.

STEPS

1

INFORMATION FILE

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The institution applies for initial accreditation to NVAO by submitting an information file. This file presents a coherent and well-structured narrative demonstrating that graduates of the programme will be able to achieve the intended learning outcomes. In the information file, the new programme outlines its plans to the panel in accordance with NVAO requirements and guidelines. The dossier follows the relevant standards of the assessment framework and is a concise, self-contained document. It is supported by relevant appendices that are clearly referenced in the main document, which should not exceed 15 to 20 pages. A strong dossier contains all necessary information, including detailed plans for the first 60 EC and the final project. It should also provide examples of course components and assessments. Particular attention should be given to the language of instruction and to the draft Teaching and Examination Regulations (in Dutch: Onderwijs- en Examenregeling, OER). The panel must be able to form a clear understanding of the actual study activities, the individual course components, and the curriculum as a coherent whole. Concrete examples can help clarify and strengthen the narrative. The application must specify all specialisations, tracks, modes of study (full-time, part-time, and work-based learning), locations, and legal requirements of the new programme. Any programme components not listed fall outside the scope of the accreditation.

2

PROJECT PLAN

After registration, the institution receives a confirmation of receipt and an invoice. NVAO appoints a process coordinator to oversee the initial a...

After registration, the institution receives a confirmation of receipt and an invoice. NVAO appoints a process coordinator to oversee the initial accreditation procedure and act as the liaison for both the institution and the panel.

The process coordinator reviews the dossier for completeness and, if necessary, requests any missing information. Within the six-month timeframe, the process coordinator prepares a project plan. The schedule depends on the availability of both the programme representatives and the panel members. A key milestone in the planning is the site visit, which typically takes place around three months after submission of the application.

3

PANEL COMPOSITION

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Once the information file is complete, NVAO assembles a panel of experts. Suggestions for independent panel members are welcome and can be valuable in this process. A panel typically consists of four members, including one student. The process coordinator keeps the institution informed about the panel's composition. The panel is supported by a secretary and the process coordinator, although they are not formal members of the panel. All panel members, the secretary, and the institution must submit a written declaration of impartiality. Only after this step is the proposed panel composition submitted to the NVAO Executive Board for approval. Once approved, the panel members and the secretary are formally appointed and granted access to the digital information file and supporting documents.

4

PREPARATION

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(Panel) The online kick-off meeting of the panel ensures a professional and well-prepared assessment process. In a 45-minute session, panel members receive a clear overview of their role and the assessment procedure. During the meeting, the panel members, the secretary, and the process coordinator are introduced to one another. NVAO explains the quality standards, decision-making rules, and the step-by-step assessment process. The principles of peer review and the importance of an open and constructive attitude are also discussed. In addition, panel members receive a demonstration of the Teams environment, which contains all relevant documents. The meeting concludes with practical information on scheduling and logistics. (Programme management) The process coordinator and programme management discuss the draft schedule for the site visit. The programme may either submit its own proposal or use the NVAO format. During the site visit, the panel typically meets with the programme management and development team, teaching staff, prospective members of the examination and programme committees, and representatives from the professional field or advisory board.

5

PANEL MEETING

For the two-hour online panel meeting, panel members review the information file and accompanying documents in advance, noting their individual obs...

For the two-hour online panel meeting, panel members review the information file and accompanying documents in advance, noting their individual observations, comments, and questions. During this preparatory meeting, the panel discusses the programme plans based on a compilation of these initial impressions. The panel reviews all standards and formulates key questions for each one, which are subsequently listed by session and, where relevant, by panel member. The panel may also submit questions to the programme or announce specific discussion topics in advance of the site visit. The draft site visit schedule is also reviewed during the panel meeting, and the panel may formulate additional requests as necessary.

6

SITE VISIT

The site visit takes place over a single day and is structured around four to five sessions. During these sessions, the panel meets with various st...

The site visit takes place over a single day and is structured around four to five sessions. During these sessions, the panel meets with various stakeholders to gain a comprehensive understanding of the plans for the new programme. At the conclusion of the visit, the panel formulates a preliminary judgement—positive, positive with conditions, or negative. The panel chair then provides a concise debriefing to the institution.

7

ADVISORY REPORT

After the site visit, the panel secretary drafts an advisory report outlining the panel's observations, analysis, and judgements resulting from the...

After the site visit, the panel secretary drafts an advisory report outlining the panel's observations, analysis, and judgements resulting from the peer review. The report also includes commendations and recommendations for follow-up actions. Once the panel has approved the draft, the process coordinator sends it to the institution for a factual accuracy check. After receiving the institution's response and incorporating any necessary adjustments, the panel finalises the advisory report. Each initial accreditation procedure produces two reports: a full report, intended for the primary audience (the institution and NVAO), and a summary report highlighting the main outcomes of the peer review for public dissemination. Both the full and summary reports are published on NVAO's website.conclusion regarding the assessment, the programme must have the conditions assessed by a panel within the timeframe stipulated. If the assessment of the conditions turns out positive, NVAO will grant initial accreditation. If the re-assessment shows that the programme fails to satisfy the conditions, NVAO will decide to refuse initial accreditation of the new programme. Programmes provided by institutions that do not hold a positive or conditionally positive institutional audit decision must have an additional audit conducted within three years, in order to have the quality achieved and learning assessment in place within the programme reviewed by a panel. If this audit turns out positive, NVAO will grant initial accreditation. If the second audit shows that the programme fails to satisfy the conditions, NVAO will decide to refuse initial accreditation of the new programme.

8

DECISION

NVAO makes its accreditation decision based on the panel's advisory report. The institution first receives a draft decision and is given the opport...

NVAO makes its accreditation decision based on the panel's advisory report. The institution first receives a draft decision and is given the opportunity to respond. Subsequently, NVAO adopts the final decision. The accreditation decision and both advisory reports are then published on NVAO's website.

9

FINALISATION

In the case of a positive judgement, or a positive judgement with conditions, the institution registers the new programme with LEO (in Dutch: Loket...

In the case of a positive judgement, or a positive judgement with conditions, the institution registers the new programme with LEO (in Dutch: Loket Erkenningen Onderwijs). If the judgement is positive with conditions, the programme must meet these conditions within the stipulated timeframe. Compliance is assessed by a panel. Upon a positive outcome, NVAO grants accreditation; if the programme does not meet the conditions, accreditation will not be awarded. Institutions without a (conditionally) positive institutional audit decision must undergo an additional review within three years. During this review, a panel evaluates the quality achieved and the assessment within the programme. The institution submits the panel report to NVAO within three years of the initial accreditation procedure. A positive outcome results in accreditation, while a negative outcome means accreditation will not be granted.

10

QUALITY ASSURANCE

NVAO continuously works to improve its processes, including the initial accreditation procedure. It engages in

dialogue with panel members and inst...

NVAO continuously works to improve its processes, including the initial accreditation procedure. It engages in dialogue with panel members and institutions regarding the peer review process and makes adjustments where necessary. Examples include the introduction of revised templates for advisory reports, guidelines for preparing a well-documented application, and a 10-step plan to support a structured and effective review process. More recently, an online kick-off meeting for panel members has also been introduced. In the coming period, NVAO will organise focus group discussions with key stakeholders to further optimise the procedure.

RATES

In 2026, the NVAO rate for an initial accreditation of a new programme amounts to €25,717. The rate for an initial accreditation of a new programme including the special feature *small-scale and intensive education* amounts to €30,853.

Different rates apply to other or non-standard procedures. Costs related to foreign site visits or the engagement of external experts, consultancy services, or additional requirements will be charged separately. If an application for the initial accreditation of a new programme is withdrawn, the following residual rates apply in 2026:

- €4,000 – prior to the start of the panel activities (including cases where the application is withdrawn or not taken into consideration);
- €14,000 – prior to the site visit;
- €25,717 (€30,853 for the special feature of small-scale and intensive education) – after the site visit.

FAQ

Which framework should institutions use in the purview of initial accreditation, the limited or the extensive framework?

Institutions that hold a positive or conditionally positive institutional audit decision may use the framework for limited programme assessments. Other institutions must use the extensive framework. The frameworks are listed at the bottom of this page.

What administrative data must institutions provide when applying for initial accreditation?

When applying for accreditation, institutions are required to list all the specialisations, modes of study, locations, and statutory requirements associated with the programme in question.

May an institution combine the initial accreditation of a new programme with an application for a distinctive feature for the pr

Yes, it may. See the information on distinctive features provided on this page.

May an institution withdraw an application it has submitted?

An institution is free to withdraw its application at any time during the assessment procedure, up until the day on which NVAO has taken a final decision in the manner stipulated in the General Administrative Law Act. Under the European Standards and Guidelines, NVAO is required to publish all the assessment reports, including those holding a negative conclusion. The administrative process commences upon the panel chair's submission of the advisory report to NVAO. In all cases, this leads to

publication of the advisory report. Should an institution withdraw its application before the panel chair submits the advisory report to NVAO, then NVAO will not publish the report.

How are panels prepared for the assessment?

Panel chairs are trained in accordance with the NVAO requirements. During preparatory consultations, the process coordinator explains the assessment framework, the assessment procedure, and the attitude expected of panel members during the interviews. Furthermore, the process coordinator ensures calibration within the panel by going over the interpretation of the standards, conclusions, and assessment rules.

Prior to the consultations, the panel reads the information dossier submitted by the programme. During the consultations, the panel members share their first impressions, formulate questions for the site visit, and agree on their approach to the site visit.

How do panels form judgements?

Within the panel, judgements are formed on a peer-by-peer basis. Equal justice is done to the various perspectives of quality represented on the panel, including the student perspective. In its judgements, the panel strives for consensus.

May an application for initial accreditation to NVAO be submitted concurrently with an application for a macro-efficiency check

The standard sequence for launching a new programme is to carry out a macro-efficiency assessment before starting the initial accreditation procedure. Changing this order entails the risk that an institution may receive a negative efficiency recommendation while the process is already under way (with the associated costs).

The CDHO and NVAO both review the name selected for the intended programme. What is the difference?

The CDHO compares the proposed name of the programme to the names commonly borne by similar programmes in the sector. The outcome of this comparison is set down in the recommendation to the Minister of Education. In the initial accreditation procedure, NVAO subsequently verifies whether the name corresponds to that of similar programmes, taking account of the CDHO recommendation. NVAO further assesses whether the name of the intended programme properly covers its contents. Ergo, the CDHO advises on the chosen name, while the ultimate decision is up to NVAO.

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