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QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM FLANDERS 2025-2031

OPERATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE MODIFICATION OF STUDY LOAD

SEPTEMBER 2025

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This operational framework applies to the universities and universities of applied sciences in Flanders.

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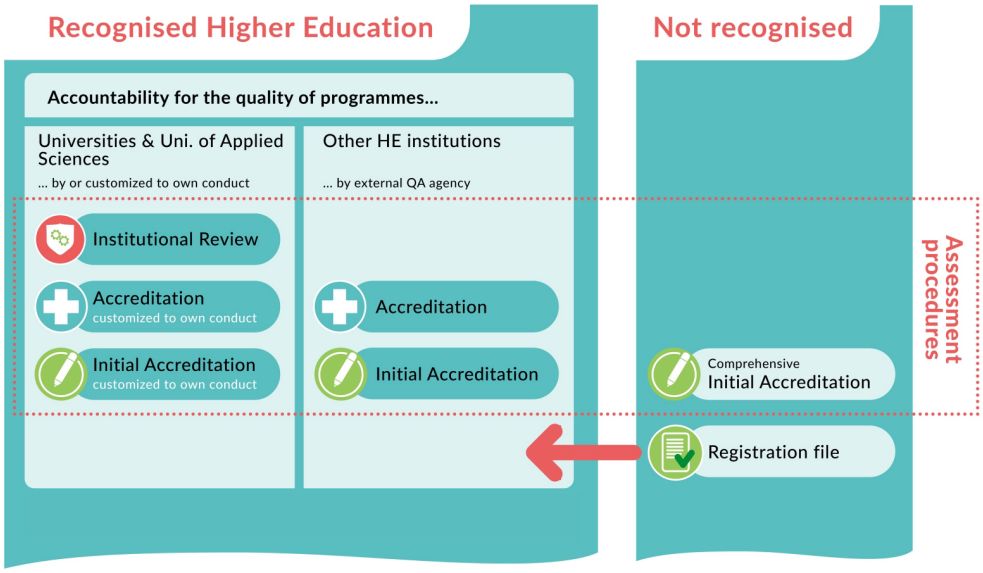
Overview of the quality assurance system for 2025-2031

The Quality Assurance System - Flanders 2025-2031 focuses on the quality of individual programmes and its accountability. This is achieved cyclically either through the institutional review, which enables universities and universities of applied sciences to account for the quality of their programmes themselves, or through accreditation, which establishes the achieved quality of a programme. External, independent experts (peers) are engaged in each assessment of educational quality, either by the institution itself or through a panel convened by NVAO or by an external evaluation body.



Recognised higher education

Universities and universities of applied sciences and arts

Universities and universities of applied sciences are solely responsible for confirming the quality of their programmes. They give account to society by publishing information on the quality of each accredited programme on their website. The institutional review assesses the manner in which a university or university of applied sciences pursues its educational policy. Within its educational policy, each institution includes a conduct for confirming the quality of its programmes. This responsibility for confirming the quality of programmes applies to accredited programmes. For this reason, each new programme to be launched is first subjected to an initial accreditation, a procedure in which an external panel assesses the potential quality of the programme.
Following recognition as a new programme, the programme is also subjected to a first programme accreditation: the official decision by NVAO that the programme meets pre-determined minimum quality and level requirements. Following the first programme accreditation (with a positive outcome), responsibility for confirming the quality of the programme is vested with the universities and universities of applied sciences themselves. Should an institutional review show a university's or university of applied sciences' inability to confirm the quality of its accredited programmes, NVAO will regain this responsibility. The confirmation of quality will then be carried out by NVAO on a programme-by-programme basis.

The initial accreditation and programme accreditation procedures are designed to optimally complement the conduct that the institution has in place for confirming the quality of its other programmes. We here refer to conduct-tailored procedures.

Other institutions

All the other recognised higher education institutions give account of the quality of their programmes through the involvement of an external evaluation body. An external evaluation body is a quality assurance agency either registered on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR, www.eqar.eu) or recognised by NVAO on the basis of a collaboration agreement warranting that the external assessment is conducted in accordance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015). The latter applies to external evaluation bodies that also perform quality assurance activities outside the European Higher Education Area.

Each new programme to be launched is subjected to an initial accreditation coordinated by NVAO and subsequently to periodic programme accreditations

Non-recognised higher education

Non-recognised education providers may be registered by the Flemish Government as providers of recognised higher education. This is based on a registration file, supplemented by a positive NVAO decision regarding the (potential) quality of the education they provide following an NVAO-coordinated comprehensive initial accreditation of at least one of their programmes.

1 Introduction

Universities and universities of applied sciences may submit an application to the Flemish Government for the modification of the study load of an existing master's programme. This may concern the expansion of an existing master's programme of 60 credits to 90 or 120 credits, or the reduction of an existing master's programme of 90 or 120 credits to 60 or 90 credits. The Flemish Council of Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences (VLUHR) coordinates the application and submits it to the Flemish Government. The Flemish Government submits the application to NVAO for advice.

The present operational framework comprises four parts: the programme structure after modification of study load, the assessment principle with the justification criteria and assessment scale and assessment rules, the NVAO-coordinated assessment procedure, and the required documentation.

NVAO advises the Flemish Government on whether the application submitted meets the justification criteria included in the present operational framework.

2 Programme structure after modification of study load

The assessment of the application to establish a research master's programme is designed on the basis of the criteria below:

2.1 Expansion of study load

The programme structure of a master's programme that results from an expansion of the study load may be designed as follows:

1. a subject-based master's programme of 90 credits;
2. a master's programme of 90 or 120 credits consisting of a subject-based component of 60 and 90 credits respectively, with a differentiation of 30 credits aimed at one or more of the following purposes:

- the acquisition of specific, profession-oriented competences other than those of a teacher;
- advanced subject-based specialisation.

3 Assessment principle

The assessment of the application for modification of study load is designed on the basis of the criteria below:

3.1 Justification criteria for expansion of study load

The assessment of the application for expansion of study load is designed on the basis of the Study Load criterion or the Learning Outcomes criterion, the Labour Market criterion and the Capacity Criterion.

3.1.1 Study Load

The study load of comparable programmes in the European Higher Education Area exceeds 60 credits and the learning outcomes of the 60-credit master's programme no longer correspond to what is common internationally.

In order to meet this criterion:

- the study load of comparable programmes abroad is examined. The application indicates which countries the institution(s) use for comparison and why (for example because of a comparable higher education system, a comparable intake, etc.); account is also taken of the duration of the bachelor's programme and the orientation of the foreign programme (professional versus academic);
- the standard international learning outcomes of those comparable foreign programmes are demonstrated.

In addition to the mandatory comparable programmes in the European Higher Education Area, comparable programmes outside the European Higher Education Area may also be used to substantiate the Study Load criterion.

3.1.2 Learning Outcomes

The learning outcomes of the existing master's programme cannot be achieved within the current study load.

In order to meet this criterion, the application demonstrates that, in order to achieve the intended learning outcomes (which are necessary to meet the international quality requirements), a curriculum is needed with a workload of more than 1,500-1,800 hours (60 credits).

3.1.3 Labour Market

The international and national labour market for graduates requires mastery of general and specific profession-oriented competences which, together with the subject-based competences, cannot be achieved within the current study load.

In order to meet this criterion, the institutions substantiate and justify the application on the basis of one of the following elements:

- changing needs in the labour market: deepening of competences or broadening of the competence profile;
- the international labour market: the relative competitive position of our graduates on the international labour market, where relevant to those graduates.

3.1.4 Capacity Criterion

The institution has the relevant capacity to offer the programme with an expanded study load in a qualitative manner, or has a developed plan to develop that capacity in the short term.
The application demonstrates how this criterion is met. The required capacity may also be built through collaboration with other institutions, whether or not through a joint programme.

Even where rationalisation is considered in the longer term, such as by clustering master's programmes in partnerships, the application must still demonstrate how the relevant capacity will be realised in the short term in order for an expansion to succeed.

3.2 Justification criteria for reduction of study load

The assessment of the application for reduction of study load is designed on the basis of the Study Load criterion and the Learning Outcomes criterion.

3.2.1 Study Load

The study load of comparable programmes in the European Higher Education Area is lower than 90 or 120 credits and the learning outcomes correspond to what is common internationally.

In order to meet this criterion:

- the study load of comparable programmes abroad is examined. The application indicates which countries the institution(s) use for comparison and why those countries are used (for example because of a comparable higher education system, a comparable intake, etc.); account is also taken of the duration of the bachelor's programme and the orientation of the programme (professional versus academic);
- the standard international learning outcomes of those comparable foreign programmes are demonstrated.

In addition to the mandatory comparable programmes in the European Higher Education Area, comparable programmes outside the European Higher Education Area may also be used to substantiate the Study Load criterion.

3.2.2 Learning Outcomes

The learning outcomes of the master's programme can be achieved within a study load of 60 or 90 credits.

In order to meet this criterion, the application demonstrates that the workload necessarily resulting from the curriculum in order to achieve the intended learning outcomes (which are necessary to meet the international quality requirements) is less than 2,520 or 3,360 hours (90 or 120 credits).

3.3 Assessment scale and assessment rule

Assessment scale

The assessment of the application for modification of study load results in one of the following decisions:

- positive advice;
- negative advice.

Assessment rule for the advice

Positive advice on expansion of study load

The application demonstrably meets the Study Load criterion or the Learning Outcomes criterion, the Labour Market criterion and the Capacity Criterion. A positive advice may contain recommendations.

Positive advice on reduction of study load

The application demonstrably meets both criteria. A positive advice may contain recommendations.

Negative advice

The application does not meet at least one of the criteria. This is demonstrably explicit.

4 Assessment procedure

4.1 Information File

The Information File enables the panel to formulate advice on the justification for the modification of the study load of the programme. The Information File clearly includes the students' position on the requested modification.
The Information File is a self-contained document. It comprises a maximum of 25 pages, excluding the required annexes under 5.2. In view of the international nature of the assessment, the Information File is drawn up in English.

4.2 Application

VLUHR acts as coordinator of the application and is responsible for submitting it to the Flemish Government by 30 April at the latest. Applications are jointly prepared and drawn up by all institutions offering the programme concerned. When drawing up the application file, students are asked to provide a substantiated position in order to arrive at a broadly supported application.

The assessment procedure starts from the moment NVAO receives a request for advice from the Flemish Government. The request for advice is submitted exclusively electronically via aanvraag@nvao.net.

As a procedural requirement, the application must consist of an application letter signed by the boards of the institutions, the Information File as described under 4.1 and the required documentation as described under 5. If a panel member so requests, a paper version is sent to that panel member under the coordination of VLUHR.

Because Dutch is the administrative language, the application letter and part of the required documentation (as indicated under 5) are drawn up in Dutch.

4.3 Admissibility

NVAO checks the admissibility of the application in order to verify whether the procedural requirement has been met. If the application is inadmissible, the institutions will be informed accordingly within a timeframe of 15 calendar days. The institutions must subsequently complete the application in consultation with the process coordinator within a timeframe of 30 calendar days.

4.4 Payment for the procedure

Once the application has been found admissible, the institutions will receive a request to pay the cost of the advice in full. The rate applicable to this procedure is fixed by the Flemish Minister of Education. The costs entailed in the work performed by the panel (remuneration) are paid by NVAO from this amount.

4.5 Composition of the panel

NVAO appoints a panel to carry out the assessment of the application.
The panel consists of at least four members, including at least three internationally authoritative domain and professional-field experts and a student.
The panel is assisted by an NVAO process coordinator, who also acts as secretary to the panel. The process coordinator does not sit on the panel.

Independence

In order to enable an objective and fair assessment, the panel must be able to work independently from the programme. This means that, over the five years prior to the appointment of the panel, its members

must not have had any connections or ties with the institutions offering the programme. All panel members and the process coordinator sign a code of deontology. This code of deontology is published on the NVAO website.

If, during the assessment process, matters arise that could affect the independence of the assessment, stakeholders may report such matters to NVAO.

4.6 Assessment and advisory report

The applications are assessed on the basis of desk research. Only in exceptional cases may a panel organise an explanatory discussion.

For each application, NVAO panels draw up an advisory report. In this report, these panels provide substantiated advice on whether or not the application meets the criteria set out in this framework. Based on this report, NVAO advises the Flemish Government on the application no later than five months after receipt of the request for advice from the Flemish Government.

5 Required documentation

5.1 Administrative data regarding the programmes (Dutch)

The administrative data are included in the application insofar as they differ from the data included in the Higher Education Register.
Administrative data regarding the programmes:

1. the name of the programme;
2. the degree and the qualification of the degree and, where applicable, the specification of the degree;
3. any specialisations;
4. the site(s) where the programme is offered;
5. the language of instruction;
6. the study load expressed in credits;
7. the programme-specific learning outcomes;
8. the field of study, part of a field of study or fields of study within which the programme is classified;
9. the corresponding programme(s) in Flemish higher education or, if these do not exist, the corresponding programme name in neighbouring countries;
10. where applicable, the title that holders of the degree of this programme may use;
11. the required prior qualifications and admission requirements.

5.2 Required annexes to the Information File (English)

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

1. programme-specific learning outcomes;
2. the joint concept for the programme structure across all providers;
3. the full curricula;
4. the design and outcome of the coordination procedure with the students;
5. the design and outcome of the coordination procedure with all providers;
6. the transitional measures: the range of options offered.

Colophon

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Assessment framework Operational Framework for the Modification of Study Load
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Department of Flanders & Luxembourg

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