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# Overview report
# Institutional review

*2020-2025*

*OCTOBER 2026*

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# 1 Introduction

Since the 2015–2016 academic year, the NVAO has used institutional reviews to assess the quality of educational policy at Flemish universities and universities of applied sciences and arts, and the way in which institutions themselves confirm the quality of their programmes in an internationally accepted manner. The institutional review thus occupies a central place in the Flemish quality assurance system, alongside continuing forms of programme assessment. This approach has given institutions greater responsibility and ownership in the quality assurance process, within a context that emphasises trust and dialogue.

An institutional review is not institutional accreditation. Accreditation remains at programme level, and only programmes can be accredited. A positive outcome of an institutional review extends the accreditation periods of accredited programmes that have already completed a full accreditation cycle. It does not authorise institutions to accredit programmes themselves or to launch new programmes without approval. For new programmes, the NVAO continues to perform a gatekeeping role through initial accreditation before the launch of the programme and then programme accreditation after the first two graduation years. Only after that programme accreditation does the institution itself assume responsibility for confirming the quality of the programme concerned.

In an institutional review, the NVAO evaluates whether an institution fulfils that responsibility. To this end, the NVAO appoints an external, independent assessment panel to investigate whether a higher education institution pursues its educational policy effectively, including its own conduct for confirming the quality of its programmes. The panel also considers how the institution supports its educational policy through the interaction between education, research, and social and scientific services.

An institution's own conduct comprises all the actions, processes, practices, procedures and instruments through which it confirms the quality of its programmes. This confirmation of quality includes systematically assessing how the own conduct works; documenting findings, strengths and points for attention; following up and addressing areas for enhancement; reporting cyclically on findings and follow-up; and having the institutional leadership demonstrably confirming the quality achieved, both internally and externally.

The NVAO defines a quality culture as an organisational culture in which all stakeholders naturally strive for continuous quality assurance and quality enhancement. Particular attention is paid to the institution's quality culture throughout the institutional review. The panel also investigates how the institution ensures the involvement of internal and external stakeholders and how it involves external, independent peers and experts in its quality assurance.

The institutional review follows NVAO's Appreciative Approach. This is grounded in the trust built up in Flemish universities and universities of applied sciences (and arts): the starting assumption is that the quality meets the requirements, and assessment panels must substantiate any contrary conclusion in detail. The institution's context and its policy choices form the starting point for the assessment. The central question is not whether the institution should have chosen a particular model, but whether the model it has chosen works in its own context and is implemented effectively. In this way, the quality assurance system recognises institutions' autonomy, their quality assurance efforts and the responsibility they have assumed in this area. NVAO's Appreciative Approach does not

preclude critical judgement. It does, however, emphasise dialogue, shared insights, and the identification and embedding of what works well, without losing sight of points for attention and questions for further development.

The first cycle of institutional reviews took place between November 2015 and May 2017 and served as a baseline assessment. The accompanying overview report (NVAO, 2017) showed that institutions had a strong educational vision and policies aligned with it, but also that the further development and embedding of internal feedback, follow-up and confirmation processes required continuing attention. This second cycle builds on those findings and provides insight into how institutions developed their educational policies and their own conduct in the intervening years.

The second cycle of institutional reviews took place between March 2021 and October 2025. It coincided with several important changes in context, including the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the further integration of associate degree programmes into universities of applied sciences (and arts). Where relevant, the assessment reports addressed these developments as factors influencing policy implementation and quality assurance. The assessment calendar was also adjusted where necessary in response.

This overview report brings together, thematically, the findings and considerations from the second cycle of institutional reviews. Its purpose is not to single out individual institutions, but to identify patterns, emphases, strengths and recurring points for attention emerging from the assessment reports. On the basis of this synthesis, emerging methodological insights and stakeholder feedback, the NVAO also sets out its own insights concerning the institutions, the institutional review and the further development of the quality assurance system. In doing so, the NVAO seeks to contribute to further reflection on educational policy, quality culture and the confirmation of programme quality in Flemish higher education.

# 2 Methodology

## 2.1 Purpose and scope of the overview report

This overview report is based on 18 institutional reviews and 3 reassessments conducted at Flemish universities and universities of applied sciences (and arts) between March 2021 and October 2025. Appendix 1 lists the institutions concerned, and Appendix 2 provides the timetable for these assessment procedures.

The overview report is intended for a broad readership and provides a thematic synthesis of the assessment panels' findings and considerations. It focuses on how the panels investigated, valued and critically questioned the institutions' educational policies and their own conduct for confirming programme quality. The synthesis goes beyond individual institutions to identify recurring patterns, emphases, strengths and points for attention. Based on this, the NVAO sets out several overarching insights and directions for further development.

## 2.2 Framework and reference documents

In an institutional review, an independent panel assesses the quality of educational policy based on the assessment framework for institutional review 2019–2025. The framework sets out the assessment philosophy and specifies the assessment ground, assessment scale, assessment procedure and assessment rule. It also establishes the principles governing how institutions exercise their own conduct for confirming the quality of their programmes and account for it.

The assessment panel structures its examination around the four coherent questions in the assessment ground, which determine the scope of the assessment:

- Is the educational policy of the institution in line with its educational vision and the societal challenges facing the institution?
    - Does the institution ensure that the educational policy works towards the set goals?
    - Within this policy, is the quality of each accredited programme confirmed in an internationally accepted manner?
- Does the institution demonstrate a quality culture at all levels?

The assessment framework for institutional review is aligned with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015). The NVAO thereby conducts institutional reviews within the internationally accepted reference framework for quality assurance in higher education.

## 2.3 Composition and preparation of the assessment panels

The assessments are carried out by panels composed and appointed by the NVAO. The composition of the individual panels is set out in Appendix 3 of this overview report and published in the corresponding assessment reports. These assessment reports are published on the NVAO website, in the Flemish Higher Education Register and in DEQAR.

As specified in the assessment framework, each panel has at least five members. An NVAO process coordinator and an external secretary support the panel in its work. The panel composition brings together different forms of expertise, including in-depth knowledge of Flemish higher education; international expertise; expertise in education and assessment;

experience of policy and evaluation processes in a leadership role outside higher education; governance expertise; and student expertise. When composing a panel, the NVAO also takes account of the context of the institution under review and, where possible, seeks a balanced composition in terms of gender and age.

Before the institutional reviews, the NVAO draws up a longlist of potential panel members based on nominations from the Flemish Interuniversity Council and the Flemish Council of Universities of Applied Sciences (and Arts). The Flemish Association of Students proposes student panel members. The NVAO then makes a further selection, taking account of the nominated candidates' backgrounds and specific expertise, to produce a shortlist. Using that shortlist, and considering the context of the institution under review, the quality assurance system coordinator composes the panel and submits its composition to the NVAO Board. The NVAO communicates the proposed panel composition to the institutional leadership. The institution has 15 days to submit reasoned objections to the composition and provide the NVAO with relevant information on panel members' expertise and independence. The NVAO considers any objections and information and adjusts the composition where necessary. No institution objected to the proposed panel composition in any of the eighteen regular institutional reviews or the five limited institutional reviews.

Before taking up their assignments, all panel members, secretaries and process coordinators complete a preparatory programme explaining their roles, the assessment framework and the application of NVAO's Appreciative Approach. The NVAO monitors consistency of assessment at system level. This consistency is supported by training comprising a theoretical learning programme and a joint session that equip the panel members with methodological tools for its assessment; by the deployment of experienced secretaries and process coordinators; and by the repeated involvement of experts across different procedures. The result is not a uniform approach that obscures differences in context, but a shared understanding of the system's philosophy, methodology and expectations.

## 2.4 How the assessment panels work

Each institutional review begins with a Critical Reflection submitted by the institution to the NVAO. In it, the institution describes and evaluates its educational policy, explains the context in which it implements that policy, and identifies strengths and points for attention. The Critical Reflection is the only document that the institution prepares specifically for this assessment procedure. It may be no more than fifty pages long, excluding any appendices, which must be kept to a minimum. For other information, the panel makes as much use as possible of existing documentation, publicly available information and web links. On that basis, the panel writes an initial appreciation of the educational policy and of the way in which the institution shapes its own conduct for confirming programme quality.

An exploratory dialogue may be held at the institution's initiative. Here, the institution determines how it engages with the panel. Documents offer initial insight into structure, policy and context, but do not always adequately explain how choices work in practice or illuminate the institution's culture and the significance of those choices. The exploratory dialogue enables the panel to clarify connections, examine strengths and questions in greater depth, and develop a shared understanding with the institution of the current position. At this stage, the panel may also request or obtain specific additional information, such as through existing documents or the institution's internal information systems. In

that sense, the exploratory dialogue is not simply an explanation of the application dossier: it is a substantive supplementary source of information for the assessment.

At the start of the second cycle of institutional reviews, panels were given access to an institutional portfolio compiled by the NVAO for each institution. The portfolio was conceived as an information-based resource to support the panel's preliminary examination and help shape the dialogue. It always complemented, and never replaced, the information and context provided by the institution itself before and during the dialogue. Like the exploratory dialogue, the portfolio could help the panel refine its understanding of the institution and its operating context. In practice, however, preparing the portfolios and agreeing their content with institutions proved labour-intensive, while their added value for panels was more limited than expected. Because the institutional portfolio contributed only modestly to panel members' preliminary examination, it also received less emphasis in the subsequent coordination of the procedure. Its use gradually declined, and the instrument was ultimately phased out.

Based on the Critical Reflection, the initial appreciation and the exploratory dialogue, the panel prepares its assessment proposal. This specifies the themes it will investigate and how it intends to investigate them. The assessment always focuses on the aspects most relevant and illuminating in the context of the institution concerned. The procedure is therefore not intended as an exhaustive check of every aspect of policy, but as an in-depth and traceable investigation of how the chosen model works.

The assessment proposal is sent to the institution no later than nine weeks before the in-depth dialogue. The institution then has six weeks in which it may, if it wishes, prepare a supplement to its Critical Reflection addressing the proposed assessment questions and review trails. Such a supplement was submitted in approximately half of the institutional reviews.

No later than four weeks before the in-depth dialogue, the institution invites all its internal stakeholders to provide written feedback and, if they wish, to engage in dialogue with the panel about the institution's educational policy, including its own conduct for confirming the quality of its programmes. The panel does not treat this input as a separate representative survey but uses it to identify additional relevant indications related to its assessment proposal and, where necessary, explore them further during the in-depth dialogue. Respondents who identify themselves may also be invited by the panel to an open consultation session. Timely and accessible circulation of the invitation within the institution is important to ensure that the opportunity to participate is sufficiently visible.

The panel uses its assessment proposal to draw up a programme for the in-depth dialogue. During that dialogue, it weighs its findings and arrives at a single holistic final judgement on the quality of educational policy and the functioning of the institution's own conduct. The assessment report makes the basis for this judgement traceable and culminates in advice to the NVAO. Before finalising the report, the process coordinator sends it to the institution. The institutional leadership then has 15 calendar days to identify factual inaccuracies and submit technical comments. The NVAO subsequently takes the formal decision based on the report and the panel's advice.

Within this approach, it is important that the final assessment report should come as no surprise to the institution. The procedure is based on intensive dialogue in which the panel and the institution progressively develop and discuss their insights. The report records the outcome of that dialogue.

## 2.5 Decision-making and appeals

After receiving the assessment report, the NVAO prepares a draft decision. It may depart from the panel's advice where it gives reasons for doing so. The NVAO sends the draft decision and underlying assessment report to the institutional leadership. An internal appeal to the NVAO is possible against any draft decision; an external appeal against the final decision may be lodged with the Council of State, in accordance with the NVAO's Regulations on Administrative Principles.

Of the eighteen regular institutional reviews in this cycle, thirteen resulted in a positive decision and five in a positive decision with limited validity. The conditions attached to positive decisions with limited validity were not formulated in the same way in every case. At three institutions, the panel itself formulated the conditions, which the NVAO subsequently adopted in its decision. At two institutions, the panel made recommendations or identified critical points for attention, but the NVAO concluded that a recommendation was insufficient and a condition was necessary.

Two institutions lodged internal appeals against positive decisions with limited validity. In one case, the NVAO had deviated from the panel's advice. In that case, the Appeals Committee recommended upholding the appeal and revising the draft decision. The NVAO subsequently retained one of the two conditions and strengthened the reasons given for its positive decision with limited validity. For the other appeal, the Appeals Committee recommended rejecting it.

Three of the five institutions that received a positive decision with limited validity have since received a positive decision. The other two institutions are undergoing a new, limited institutional review in the 2026–2027 academic year. In these limited institutional reviews, the panel focuses its investigation on the elements addressed by the conditions imposed earlier. The institution must demonstrate that it has fulfilled those conditions.

# 3 Report of findings and considerations

This chapter provides a thematic synthesis of the findings and considerations in the assessment panels' reports, followed by the main recommendations and conditions arising from the assessments. It focuses on how the panels examined, interpreted and reported on institutions' educational policies and their own conduct for confirming programme quality. The synthesis goes beyond individual institutions to identify patterns, emphases, strengths and points for attention relevant to the Flemish higher education landscape.

This chapter is intended to support learning and takes an appreciative approach. It identifies both good practices and areas for development, while recognising differences between institutions.

## 3.1 Assessment themes

The panels determine their assessment proposals based on the Critical Reflection, their initial appreciation and the exploratory dialogue with the institution. Each assessment is therefore tailored to its context, starting from the profile and policy choices of the institution concerned. Nevertheless, an analysis of all the assessment reports reveals clear recurring patterns.

The table below groups the themes occurring most frequently in the assessment proposals. The frequency indicates how many of the eighteen regular institutional reviews explicitly addressed the theme in the in-depth dialogue. The three reassessments following positive decisions with limited validity are excluded from this count, as they focused mainly on following up previously imposed conditions.

Tabel 1. Most frequent themes in the assessment proposals

| Theme | Scope | Frequency |
|---|---|---|
| Quality assurance system and own conduct | Own conduct, quality assurance cycle, confirmation decisions, public information, confirmation of the attainment level (achieved by graduates), benchmarking, quality culture, and intervention on points for attention. | 18 |
| External perspective | Involvement of independent external peers, the professional field, alumni and experts; composition and independence of panels; external validation of the attainment level and curriculum relevance. | 17 |
| Vision and strategic direction | Educational vision, profile, strategic ambitions, societal mission, international or regional positioning, and relationship between education and research. | 16 |
| Governance and division of roles | Balance between central steering and decentralised autonomy and responsibility; roles of governing and consultative bodies; feedback | 15 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | loops, resource allocation and practicality of the organisational model. | |
| Involvement of internal stakeholders | Student participation; teaching staff involvement in quality assurance; programme or standing education committees; feedback loops and shared ownership. | 14 |
| Policy into practice: implementation and follow-up | Translation of strategy into programmes; annual action plans; implementation of policy frameworks; monitoring, prioritisation, communication and information flows. | 13 |
| HR-policy | Professional development, workload, career and promotion policy, leadership, onboarding and well-being. | 12 |
| Diversity and inclusion | Inclusive learning environments, diverse entrants, language policy, intercultural competences, inclusive communication and diversity in staffing policy. | 9 |
| Data-informed working | Management information, dashboards, indicators, business intelligence and use of data for policy, quality assurance and monitoring strategic goals. | 6 |
| Other specific emphases | Internationalisation, interdisciplinarity, authentic practice-oriented learning, study progress, programme portfolio and specific programme contexts. | 6 |

The table shows that the second cycle of institutional reviews places greater emphasis than the first on institutions' own conduct and on the concrete confirmation of programme quality. Whereas panels in the first cycle mainly investigated whether institutions had developed a shared educational vision and corresponding policy, this cycle focuses on how institutions shape their own conduct for programme quality. In particular, the panels examine how institutions systematically follow up their policies, how they formally establish quality at governance level, and how strategic policy translates into practice for programmes, students and teaching staff, becoming visible in analysis, decision-making and enhancement.

This chapter is organised around five overarching themes derived from the categorisation of recurring assessment themes. They bring together related findings that formed recognisable patterns across the institutional reviews. For each theme, it identifies trends in the assessment reports and points on which panels expressed appreciation or considered further development desirable.

As in the underlying assessment reports, this synthesis is not intended to measure institutions against a single universal benchmark. Findings must always be read in the context of the institution concerned and its policy choices: similar points for attention may have different meanings and significance in different contexts.

### 3.1.1 Vision and strategic direction

The panels examine institutions' vision and strategic direction as a foundation for subsequent policy choices. They analyse how institutions articulate their identity and strategic priorities, connect these with their core missions, and take account of their operating context and the societal challenges they face.

Several assessment reports describe a widely shared educational vision, often rooted in clear values and in the institution's societal, regional or international context. Institutions often develop this vision further by bringing it together in a coherent core narrative or institutional identity that guides policy choices. A clear vision provides a common frame of reference for stakeholders to discuss and test those choices. Panels appreciate institutions that not only articulate their vision but also apply it consistently in strategic documents, policy choices and external positioning. Particular attention is paid to how identity informs strategic choices about the programme portfolio. Such choices are easier to follow when explicitly linked to the mission and identity of the institution.

The Critical Reflection is expected to explicitly contextualise policy and substantive choices. Panels consider not only the content of the educational vision and its strategic priorities, but also how those priorities arise. They appreciate it when scans of societal, regional and international trends and developments demonstrably inform policy choices, resource allocation and external positioning.

At the same time, panels repeatedly emphasise the importance of focus, prioritisation and feasibility. Where strategic ambitions are broad, they ask how clearly these ambitions translate into governance choices, expectations and support at other organisational levels. Strategic clarity also includes a willingness to decide explicitly what not to pursue, allowing resources and attention to remain focused on the chosen direction. Several assessment reports note that strategic renewal becomes sustainable only when institutions explain which initiatives they will scale up, embed, adjust or discontinue, and the criteria on which they base those decisions.

#### 3.1.1.1 Educational vision and policy in practice

The panels examine the extent to which institutions translate their educational vision and policy ambitions into concrete actions, and how they monitor and, where necessary, adjust implementation. They consider how institutions build support for their ambitions and manage transitions when new priorities conflict with established routines or cultures. Particular attention is paid to how policy takes effect at different organisational levels.

The assessment reports show that institutions carry out their educational vision in different ways across faculties, departments and programmes. At several institutions, panels find that consultative structures, support services, key individuals or intermediate levels help connect central policy with programme practice. Systematic knowledge sharing helps clarify expectations and prevent policy fragmentation.

Panels appreciate it when institutions visibly translate policy ambitions into coherent action programmes or development pathways while giving programmes sufficient room to shape them in their own context. Where institutions explain how they implement, monitor and consolidate such ambitions step by step, the translation of strategy into practice becomes clear to all concerned.

At the same time, several assessment reports raise questions about prioritisation, follow-up and information flows. Even where policy is well developed at institutional level, institutions still need to demonstrate clearly how they monitor its implementation at

different levels, what signals emerge, and on what basis they decide that adjustments are needed.

Learning across programmes, faculties or departments, and services is also a recurring theme. Panels note that institutions often have valuable initiatives and experience, but do not always find it easy to bring these together, interpret them and share them systematically across the organisation. The question is not only whether effective practices exist, but whether institutions make them systematically visible and transferable.

#### 3.1.1.2 Data-informed working

Several assessment reports show that institutions invest strongly in data to support policy and quality assurance. This includes management information, indicators, dashboards, surveys and other systematic data collection to inform policy choices and enable targeted follow-up. Panels note growing attention to monitoring strategic objectives through milestones, progress indicators and explicit approaches to risk. They appreciate the use of these tools to make policy implementation visible and provide relevant information to the actors concerned at different organisational levels.

Panels emphasise that data alone do not demonstrate quality. They acquire meaning only when interpreted in context. Panels ask whether information is usable, accessible and meaningful at all organisational levels, and whether indicators show not only processes but also the effects of policy actions. Dashboards often show mainly what is happening; panels also ask to explicitly state in what it results.

When institutions develop new policies, panels recommend considering evaluation criteria, monitoring and feedback early, for each theme and organisational level. This is not intended to reduce complex processes to numbers, but to enable institutions to monitor and discuss the effects of policy choices and adjust them where necessary. Contextual interpretation remains essential.

### 3.1.2 Governance

Panels regularly examine how institutions' organisational structures work and how formal and informal responsibilities and reporting lines are arranged. They consider the extent to which governance structures support educational policy and quality assurance.

Panels appreciate institutions that organise policy choices, support and follow-up coherently, without allowing governance structures to become detached from educational practice. Clear roles, effective consultative forums and explicit assignment of authority can strengthen the link between policy and implementation.

Panels also examine how traceable decision-making is: who has authority at which level, how are decisions documented and communicated, and what escalation routes apply when difficulties arise. Explicitly and consistently defining and applying roles and decision-making lines increases transparency and predictability in governance.

The division of roles and responsibilities also matters when institutional leadership formally confirms programme quality. In several reviews, panels investigated this in greater depth: at which governance level a decision confirming quality is made, how the independence of judgement is safeguarded and how preparatory or advisory bodies relate to the formally authorised institutional leadership. Decisions must be objective, transparent and embedded at institutional level; panels see this as vital to the credibility of the institution's own conduct.

Most assessment reports address the balance between central steering and decentralised autonomy and responsibility. Panels describe a workable balance at several institutions, while stressing that it depends on context and needs continuing attention. Where institutions emphasise subsidiarity, the central level must still monitor how priorities are implemented and maintain coherence across the organisation. Conversely, excessive centralisation can threaten the distinctive character of programmes, faculties or departments.

A recurring development question is how to put subsidiarity into practice. Panels sometimes ask institutions to clarify the criteria for granting programmes, faculties or departments more autonomy, when to increase central steering, and how support is differentiated. This is discussed further under Theme 3, 'Quality assurance system'.

Panels regularly describe the role of middle management as crucial. Faculties, departments, coordinating positions and cross-cutting roles often connect central policy choices with local implementation. Panels ask institutions to support, position and empower these intermediate levels, especially when they must connect diverse interests and information flows. Several reports also stress professional development and consistency of roles.

Panels also highlight collaboration across services, faculties or departments, and programmes. When effective, it strengthens policy coherence and shared responsibility for quality. For several institutions, keeping consultative structures manageable, coordinating forums and avoiding unnecessary governance activity remain points for attention. Periodically reviewing the purpose, overlap and added value of these structures can improve efficiency without diminishing participation or involvement.

Finally, panels note that governance becomes more complex where institutions expand, merge or operate across multiple campuses. In such cases they must achieve coordination without creating new silos, while remaining close to educational practice. Panels appreciate institutions that clearly explain how they maintain coherence and clarity of roles in these contexts.

### 3.1.3 Quality assurance system

Under the current quality assurance system, universities and universities of applied sciences (and arts) are explicitly responsible for confirming the quality of their accredited programmes. They are expected to develop transparent and convincing own conduct through which they can demonstrably confirm programme quality. This includes not only procedures and instruments, but also how institutions analyse results and draw conclusions, follow up points for attention, take decisions and make information public.

Assessment reports show that institutions have further developed and embedded their own conduct and quality assurance in day-to-day operations, albeit to varying degrees and with differing emphases. In several cases, panels describe a clear move towards a more systematic approach and stronger embedding of quality assurance in institutional governance.

Panels also note that further developing the own conduct may increase complexity. At some institutions, they value comprehensive, well-documented quality assurance processes while questioning their practicality. They do not call for less rigour, but for proportionality and clarity so that quality assurance continues to support the core educational process. This preference for simplicity accords with a broader system

principle: documentation and procedural steps should be limited to what is needed to understand how an institution's policy and own conduct work.

Several reports note that institutions differentiate follow-up and support for programmes, but do not always explain the underlying assessment of maturity. Panels encourage them to state the criteria under which programmes receive greater autonomy or more intensive follow-up. An explicit, consistently applied framework makes the own conduct more predictable and legitimate and supports programme learning without losing its developmental orientation.

Assessment reports also examine how institutions monitor the attainment level achieved by the graduates of their programmes. Panels appreciate external comparison and systematic involvement of experts in evaluating student assessment and attainment level. Where such elements are less explicitly embedded, panels ask to make them more visible and traceable within the own conduct.

Quality assurance must show not only that processes exist, but that they lead to institutionally endorsed judgements on programme quality and visible follow-up. Panels ask how institutions monitor enhancement actions and decide when to adjust them. The legitimacy of the own conduct depends on connecting quality assurance activities, stakeholder consultation, external expertise, results and outcomes, confirmation decisions, and public information.

#### 3.1.3.1 Quality culture and involvement of internal stakeholders

Assessing quality culture is central to institutional review. Panels consider how stakeholders pursue continuous quality assurance and enhancement, and how formal processes and informal practices support shared responsibility for quality. Several reports describe a present quality culture, where a continuing care for quality is evident in everyday operations.

For this, participation structures play an important role. Panels pay particular attention to student and staff involvement in policy and quality assurance. At several institutions, they find strong engagement through both formal consultative bodies and informal consultation and feedback.

A recurring question is how institutions turn signals from consultation, feedback and evaluations into decisions and follow-up. Where this process is visible, it strengthens the traceability of quality assurance and the confidence in the processes for those involved.

Panels regularly call for stronger support for and embedding of participation. This includes training and guidance for student representatives, recognition of their contribution and clarity about their role in policy and quality assurance. Formal student involvement does not automatically ensure continuity or equal impact everywhere. Panels stress that institutions should regard students not merely as consumers of education, but as full partners in policy and quality.

Feedback on what happens with the contributions in those participation structures is not always equally visible. Panels stress the importance of complete and transparent feedback loops so that students, teaching staff and other internal stakeholders can see what their input brings about. Visible feedback supports trust in quality assurance and strengthens shared ownership.

#### 3.1.3.2 External perspective

The NVAO expects institutions to involve independent external experts and peers in their own conduct. This external perspective helps institutions critically examine policy, quality assurance and programme quality, and supports the legitimacy of confirmation decisions.

Panels examine how institutions integrate external perspectives into quality assurance. Reports describe varying methos to do so, such as quality dialogues, benchmarking, programme assessments, curriculum reform, assessment policy and advisory boards. Panels appreciate systematic, well-documented involvement of external experts.

Panels also ask about the composition, independence and follow-up of external contributions. A recurring question is whether institutions sufficiently look beyond familiar networks, and to what extent this external input is used to prompt genuine critical reflection and broaden viewpoints. In some reports, panels call for explicit criteria for independence and expertise, to ensure that the legitimacy of the external input is clear for all stakeholders.

External expertise must not be confined to occasional meetings or assessments of quality assurance processes. The external perspective should contribute meaningfully to discussions of programme quality: curriculum relevance, attainment level, student assessment, professional relevance and the effect of enhancement actions. Panels encourage institutions to define expert roles clearly and explicitly and systematically link their input to analysis, decision-making and follow-up.

#### 3.1.3.3 Confirmation decision and public information

Confirmation decisions and public information are the essential final elements of the own conduct. Institutions generally have developed quality assurance cycles in which they periodically assess programmes, document findings and follow up enhancement actions. Panels examine not only whether these processes exist, but whether they lead to a formal confirmation of programme quality by the institutional leadership and to meaningful information for internal and external stakeholders.

A confirmation decision formally concludes the quality assurance cycle. It is an explicit, substantiated judgement by institutional leadership on programme quality, not merely an administrative step. It should rest on a balanced analysis of all results and outcomes of the own conduct, including strengths, points for attention and the way in which elements for enhancement are followed up. The confirmation decision makes quality visible and demonstrates that the institutional leadership assumes responsibility for the programme quality.

Reports show that institutions use different forms of formal quality confirmation. Panels value this variety provided it remains clear and traceable who confirms programmes' quality, on what basis, how follow-up is ensured, and how information is made available internally and externally. Such substantiation supports the legitimacy of decisions, programmes' learning and traceable quality assurance.

Institutional leadership must visibly assume responsibility for formally confirming programme quality. The institution itself is responsible for the coherence of its own conduct and for bringing different sources of information together in determining quality.

The importance the NVAO attaches to formally closing the quality assurance cycle was reflected in one of its decisions. The panel had made a recommendation, but the NVAO found this insufficient and imposed a condition requiring the institution to close the cycle

with a formal confirmation decision. The institutional leadership must confirm programme quality on the basis of its own balanced analysis of the results and outcomes of every element of its own conduct.

Public information is more than communication about quality assurance. It enables a university or university of applied sciences (and arts) to account publicly for the quality of each programme whose quality it confirms, and is an essential element of the own conduct. A clear, traceable link between underlying analysis, the confirmation decision and the public information strengthens public accountability and confidence in the own conduct.

Public information must give stakeholders a clear, current and reliable picture of the quality of every individual programme, including strengths and points for attention. Panels and the NVAO consider whether information is current, accessible, traceable, valid and intelligible to its intended audiences, including international students where institutions have an international profile or offer international programmes.

Some reports stress the importance of consistent formats, clear language and regular updating so that information is timely and accessible for students, prospective students, the professional field and other stakeholders. Panels regard accessible public information, clearly describing strengths and points for attention and explicitly linked to a confirmation decision as a good practice supporting transparency and internal learning.

This issue also affected NVAO decisions. In one case, a panel recommended improving the topicality and timely availability of public information. The NVAO found that available information did not always give a realistic, valid picture of programme quality or clearly showed strengths and points for attention. Because public information is an essential quality feature of the own conduct, a recommendation was insufficient. The NVAO imposed a condition that the public information must be realistic, valid, current and publicly available for every programme, including to international students.

Attention to confirmation decisions and public information shows that trust in the own conduct goes hand in hand with demonstrable evidence. Institutions may shape quality assurance according to their context, scale and culture, but must show how they establish programme quality, ensure follow-up and communicate transparently. Further development lies primarily in stronger links between quality assurance processes, governance decisions and public accountability.

### 3.1.4 HR-policy

As institutional tasks and expectations grow more complex, pressure on staff increases. A thoughtful HR-policy is important for achieving policy ambitions and sustainably confirming programme quality. Panels examine various aspects of the HR-policy, such as recruitment and selection, onboarding, professional development, leadership development and career policy.

Panels appreciate broad, accessible professional development that helps staff translate the educational vision into consistent teaching practice. Particular attention is required for the teaching competences of new staff, career changers and guest lecturers where they are expected to contribute quickly to teaching and student assessment. A rich range of training does not automatically make its impact visible; institutions should monitor participation and effects on practice.

Panels observe a shift towards broader, more development-oriented promotion models. At universities in particular, they appreciate greater recognition of contributions to education

and governance alongside research output. These changes can help universities recognise education as a full part of academic careers rather than merely a supporting activity.

Panels emphasise future-oriented HR-policies addressing manageable workloads, clearly defined duties, support and well-being. In multiple reports, panels mention that the sustainability of policy ambitions depend partly on staff wellbeing and protection from overwork. Panels value preventive policies on workload and well-being, systematically linked to monitoring and adjustment. Transparent duties and workload models should keep expectations for education, research and services realistic and clear to staff.

Panels value data-informed staffing indicators and allocation models, while calling for a clear link between workforce planning and policy ambitions to enable timely adjustments to recruitment, deployment and professional development.

### 3.1.5 Diversity and inclusion

Institutions now have increasingly diverse student and staff populations. Assessment reports therefore regularly identify diversity and inclusion as important educational-policy issues.

At several institutions, panels identify initiatives to maximise students' opportunities for development and growth, including inclusive learning environments, safe and inclusive internship placements, and language policy. Language policies range from support for academic language skills to considering multilingualism and the accessibility of information and services for different groups. Panels also consider flexible study pathways that may reduce barriers to higher education, including modular provision, tailored trajectories for working students and blended learning.

Panels observe initiatives strengthening a sense of belonging, such as buddy schemes, coaching and projects for first-generation students. They appreciate these when embedded in policy and effective in practice. Panels also examine social safety and reporting channels, ombudsman services and confidential advisers addressing discrimination and inappropriate behaviour.

Panels call for diversity and inclusion policies to be more explicit, structurally embedded and monitored. Clear objectives and reflection on the effects of policies matter, as the existence of initiatives alone cannot establish their impact.

Panels note that diversity and inclusion are not always equally visible in staffing policy and encourage institutions to work on inclusive recruitment, selection and professional development practices where relevant.

## 3.2 Recommendations and conditions

### 3.2.1 Recommendations

The table summarises the main recommendation themes. It does not reproduce recommendations to individual institutions but presents an aggregated depiction of their essence. Each recommendation was tailored to the institution, taking account of its context, scale and policy choices. Nevertheless, a recognisable pattern emerges across the reports.

Recommendations seek to refine, clarify and sustain existing practices, not replace the institutional model. Panels call for clearer frameworks, better follow-up, traceable

decisions and feedback loops. They value autonomy and ownership while expecting explicit, traceable and assessable choices. Especially the link between strategic policy, use of data, quality assurance, external expertise, participation of internal stakeholders and governance decisions requires attention.

Tabel 2. Main recommendation themes

| Recommendation theme | Overall essence of the recommendation |
|---|---|
| Quality assurance system and own conduct | Strengthen the own conduct by keeping quality assurance processes manageable, traceable and proportionate; close the Plan–Do–Check–Act cycle throughout; clarify criteria for maturity, follow-up and intervention; maintain the link between analysis, enhancement actions, confirmation decisions and public information. |
| External perspective | Make the independent external perspective a structural, visible element of quality assurance, validation of attainment level, benchmarking, curriculum development and strategic reflection. Look beyond familiar networks. |
| Involvement of internal stakeholders | Strengthen student and teaching staff involvement at programme and policy level; ensure visible feedback loops; support student representatives and clarify how their input affects decisions. |
| Policy into practice and follow-up | Translate strategic ambitions into clear goals, milestones, actions and evaluation criteria; monitor prioritisation, follow-up and information flows between central, faculty/departmental and programme levels. |
| Governance and division of roles | Clarify responsibilities, consultative structures and decision-making lines; maintain a balance between central steering and decentralised autonomy; keep organisational models workable and transparent during growth or change. |
| HR-policy | Develop strategic, systematic HR-policies supporting professional development, career progression, feedback, well-being, workload management, leadership and diversity. |
| Diversity and inclusion | Make diversity and inclusion more concrete, visible and measurable in education, student guidance, staffing policy and quality assurance; establish or refine policy frameworks and monitor the effectiveness of initiatives. |
| Public information | Provide current, accessible, intelligible, realistic and valid information on programme quality, including strengths, points for attention and follow-up; connect it with outcomes of the own conduct. |
| Data-informed working | Use data, dashboards and indicators to support policy dialogue and quality assurance; ensure data help explain |

| | |
|---|---|
| | effects, results and needs for adjustment, not merely describe processes. |
| Vision and strategic direction | Articulate strategic ambitions clearly, ensure feasibility and, where needed, allow time for consolidation so existing policy choices become firmly embedded. |

### 3.2.2 Conditions

In five of the eighteen regular institutional reviews, panels formulated conditions, resulting in positive decisions with limited validity. In three cases the panel formulated the conditions and the NVAO adopted them; in two the panel made recommendations or identified critical points for attention, but the NVAO judged these insufficient and imposed a condition.

Conditions do not depart from NVAO's Appreciative Approach. In a system of trust, they specify which elements an institution must demonstrably strengthen in the short term. Recommendations define the boundary between developmental recommendations and necessary safeguards required for effective policy and own conduct.

The table presents conditions in aggregate. Some conditions concern several aspects of the own conduct, so the categories in this table are not strictly separate. The table shows which quality assurance issues prompted conditions and distinguishes developmental recommendations from necessary safeguards. Conditions are not linked to individual institutions, preserving this report's synthetic character.

Tabel 3. Aggregate conditions attached to positive decisions with limited validity

| Core of condition | Aggregated content | Source |
|---|---|---|
| Own conduct, independent external perspective and confirmation decisions | The institution had to develop its own conduct for confirming programme quality, including a formal confirmation decision for each programme and public information based on the results and outcomes of the own conduct. The institution also had to involve independent external peers and experts within its own conduct, especially to help achieve the intended attainment level. | Assessment panel |
| Governance and organisational model | The institution had to redefine its governance and design a cooperative, dynamic organisational model and related processes. The condition concerned the governmental and organisational foundations for sustainable quality assurance and policy implementation. | Assessment panel |
| Independent external expertise and information about the quality of programmes | The institution needed to involve independent external experts, especially higher education experts, for the confirmation of programme quality. The institution had to provide informative, accessible, current internal and | Assessment panel |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | external communication about the quality of each programme, explicitly naming strengths and points for attention. | |
| Public information | The institution had to ensure that the information about the quality of its programmes is realistic, valid, current and publicly available, including for international students. The panel recommended this; the NVAO imposed a condition. | NVAO decision-making |
| Formal closure of the quality assurance cycle | The institution had to close the quality assurance cycle with a confirmation decision, which is the institutional leadership's balanced analysis of the results and outcomes from every element of its own conduct. The panel recommended this; the NVAO imposed a condition. | NVAO decision-making |

Conditions centre on core aspects of the own conduct: formal confirmation of programme quality, the involvement of independent external expertise, public information about programme quality, and governmental and organisational arrangements for sustainable quality assurance. They show that trust in the own conduct requires evidence. Institutions can tailor their quality assurance approach to their own context, but must be able to demonstrate how they confirm quality, who is involved in doing so, how they make information about programme quality publicly available and how the institutional leadership fulfils its responsibility.

Follow-up of positive decisions with limited validity confirms the remedial role of conditions. Three institutions have since received a new positive decision: two after a full assessment procedure and one through a shorter follow-up procedure. Follow-up for two institutions is scheduled for the 2026–2027 academic year.

# 4 NVAO's insights

The insights in this chapter are drawn primarily from the thematic synthesis of the assessment reports. They also take account of an NVAO stakeholder survey, the external evaluation of the 2019–2025 quality assurance system carried out by IDEA Consult at the minister's request, and the lessons the NVAO set out in its follow-up memorandum. The NVAO also draws on its experience of the Tour of Flanders in 2022, 2024 and 2026. In these meetings, the NVAO discussed recent policy developments and the follow-up of earlier assessments over the preceding two years with each institution. This chapter includes insights with wider relevance to the operation and further development of the quality assurance system.

The chapter distinguishes between findings from the institutional reviews, the conditions for sustainable own conduct, and the NVAO's reflections on the operation and further development of the system.

## 4.1 Confirmation of the capacity of the quality assurance system

The second cycle of institutional reviews confirms that, in a context of trust and dialogue, institutions can take responsibility for their educational policy and for confirming the quality of their programmes in a qualitative manner. The assessment reports show that institutions have further developed and embedded their own conduct in recent years. They have adopted different models reflecting their scale, profile, organisational culture and strategic choices.

The NVAO regards this variation as a strength of the quality assurance system and a logical consequence of its underlying philosophy. The institutional review does not prescribe a single quality assurance model. Instead, it examines whether the model chosen by an institution works in its own context and is implemented effectively. The second cycle shows that this approach gives institutions room to exercise ownership, reflect and develop.

A distinctive feature of this cycle is that the institutional review does not use separate standards or criteria, each leading to an individual assessment. It starts from one integrated assessment ground and results in one holistic, reasoned judgement. Experience in this cycle shows that this principle works in practice: panels were able to weigh different findings together, in the institution's context, and reach a shared final judgement. The absence of separate standards does not make the assessment less normative. Rather, it shifts the emphasis from checking off individual requirements to a traceable, substantiated assessment of how the whole system fits together and works.

The NVAO considers the retention of the quality assurance system's underlying philosophy for the 2025–2031 cycle an important achievement. Its retention cannot, however, be taken for granted. This second cycle shows that trust and autonomy must always be accompanied by demonstrable evidence, traceability and responsibility at governance level. Own conduct does not mean that confirmation of quality can remain wholly internal or implicit. Institutions are trusted to confirm the quality of their programmes themselves and must continue to justify that trust through the results and outcomes of their own conduct. They must therefore take reliable confirmation decisions, provide transparent public information and demonstrably assume responsibility for the substantive quality of their programmes. In doing so, they both meet the system's requirements and help maintain public confidence in it.

## 4.2 Flexibility in the assessment methodology requires purposeful use

In some institutional reviews, preparations for the exploratory dialogue included a brief, focused explanation by the institution of institution-specific concepts or structures in its Critical Reflection, including its own conduct. This followed the panel's independent initial appreciation and did not replace it. The NVAO views this approach positively. A concise explanation can help the panel navigate the Critical Reflection and the institution's underlying arrangements more efficiently, avoiding the use of exploratory site-visit time solely to clarify terms. It also supports the freedom of form that the assessment framework deliberately gives institutions when preparing their Critical Reflection. They need not present their educational policy and own conduct in a uniform format or a structure imposed by the NVAO. A brief explanation can make institution-specific terminology or arrangements accessible to the panel without restricting that autonomy. The panel must nevertheless first read the Critical Reflection independently and form its initial appreciation, so that the additional explanation deepens, rather than directs, the panel's independent judgement.

The second cycle shows considerable variation in how institutions shaped the exploratory dialogue, whether independently or in consultation with the panels. Alongside more conventional thematic discussions, they used tours, demonstrations, presentations, cases, pitches and interactive approaches. This variation suits the context-directed nature of the institutional review and can aid to make policy and quality assurance more concrete and visible to the panel. Such visits add considerable value when the Critical Reflection and exploratory dialogue form a coherent whole and where the programme of the exploratory dialogue allows for a better understanding of how the institution works.

The assessment reports also show that the chosen approach must always serve the purpose of the exploratory dialogue. Concrete examples and meetings with a range of participants can substantially enrich the panel's understanding. Conversely, an excessive emphasis on isolated examples or a mere presentation of the institution can make it harder to understand the coherence and systematic nature of its educational policy. It may also leave insufficient room for questions arising from the panel's initial appreciation.

The methodological lesson for the NVAO is therefore not to prescribe one format. The value of the exploratory dialogue lies precisely in the freedom to tailor it to the institution's context. Its design should enable panel members to enrich and sharpen the understanding they formed when reading the Critical Reflection and formulating their initial appreciation. Creativity is a means of making the institution's account intelligible, not a goal in and of its own. Afterwards, the panel must have enough information to decide which matters it does, and does not, need to examine in greater depth.

The open consultation session allows students and staff who are not participants in the regular programme to share information directly with the panel. It provides an additional channel alongside the Critical Reflection, available documentation and scheduled discussions.

Institutions may be concerned that individual experiences could receive disproportionate weight, or that this channel is difficult to reconcile with the trust and NVAO's Appreciative Approach underpinning the institutional review. Experience in this cycle provides no indication, however, that the open consultation session operated as a separate complaints channel. Where contributions visibly influenced the assessment, they either confirmed findings from other information sources or prompted the panel to test earlier indications further.

From the NVAO's perspective, the open consultation session therefore adds another voice to the procedure. The panel does not regard information obtained through it as a finding in its own right but weighs it alongside the other assessment evidence. The session can contribute to triangulation and help the panel establish whether the picture emerging from documents and scheduled discussions is confirmed, nuanced or calls for further inquiry. It does not detract from the context-sensitive, appreciative nature of the institutional review, but broadens the evidence base for the panel's assessment.

## 4.3 Own conduct hinges on demonstrable confirmation of quality

A central lesson of this cycle is that the maturity of an institution's own conduct is not shown merely by the presence of processes, consultative structures or instruments. What matters is whether those processes lead to a traceable, institutionally endorsed confirmation of quality.

Responsibility for the own conduct requires institutions to reach their own integrated judgement on the quality of their programmes. External support, audits and other independent assessments cannot replace that judgement. An external assessment report may, for example, be an important outcome, and thus source within the own conduct, but the institutional leadership must be able to consider and weigh the results and outcomes of all elements in the own conduct.

The results and outcomes of the own conduct must enable institutional leadership to make a statement on the quality of each programme. That statement must clarify both strengths and points for attention. A confirmation decision is therefore not merely an administrative step: it concludes the quality assurance cycle. Without such a demonstrable decision, the relationship between analysis, follow-up and decision-making remains unclear.

The appeal procedures have clarified this point further. They show that a quality assurance cycle is convincingly closed only when the involvement of internal and external stakeholders and experts, the results and the analysis of them (outcomes), follow-up of points for attention, the confirmation decisions and public information are logically connected.

This second cycle also shows that the governance arrangements for such decisions matter. The responsible governing body need not have the same name or organisational form at every institution, but formal confirmation of programme quality must be clearly anchored at the institutional level.

## 4.4 Public information is more than communication

During parliamentary consideration of the decree underpinning the current institutional reviews, all political parties emphasised the importance of public information about the quality of individual programmes. Like the NVAO, the government expects institutions to be accountable to society for programme quality, in return for the trust and greater autonomy they receive. This is not merely a formal requirement: public information is an important pillar of the quality assurance system. Institutional reviews nevertheless show that public information about programme quality remains a point requiring sustained attention. As an essential part of public accountability, the public information must be easy to find. It must follow from analysis and decision-making within the own conduct and explain, in a clear and up to date manner, what characterises a programme's quality, its strengths, the points for attention identified and how the institution arranges follow-up.

Where public information is clearly linked to confirmation decisions and underlying analyses, it strengthens confidence in the own conduct. Where that connection remains unclear, public information risks being formally available without contributing sufficiently to transparency for students, prospective students, the professional field and other stakeholders.

## 4.5 Involvement must have a visible effect

The second cycle of institutional reviews again confirms the importance of involving internal and external stakeholders and independent experts. Students, teaching staff, representatives of the professional field, alumni, independent external peers and experts all play an important role in quality assurance. Their involvement strengthens support, substantive scrutiny and the legitimacy of the own conduct.

However, formal involvement alone is not enough. The assessment reports show that panels particularly examine the impact of such involvement: how an institution gathers and interprets contributions, provides feedback, and uses them in analysis, decision-making and follow-up. Students and teaching staff must not only be able to contribute; they must also be able to see what happens with their input. External experts must likewise demonstrably contribute an authoritative perspective on the quality of the programmes themselves.

The NVAO's follow-up memorandum on the external evaluation by IDEA Consult supports these findings. It stresses the importance of clear expectations concerning independent external experts. It also emphasises the importance of public information that makes it understandable how an institution establishes and accounts for quality, through the involvement of internal and external stakeholders and experts.

## 4.6 Discipline-specific learning outcomes connect substantive quality, comparability and topicality

Discipline-specific learning outcomes (DLO) are an important substantive cornerstone of the Flemish quality assurance system. At educational-qualification level, they describe the common knowledge, skills and attitudes that all students in Flanders are expected to acquire within the same qualification. They thus support transparency and comparability: students, the professional field and other stakeholders should be able to trust that identical degrees guarantee a comparable set of learning outcomes. Following validation by the NVAO, the DLO also form the basis for including the qualification at level 5, 6 or 7 of the Flemish Qualifications Framework.

The significance of the DLO extends beyond the formal positioning of a qualification. They also serve as a reference point for curriculum design and internal and external quality assurance. Their validation rests on an integrated expectation of quality: they must reflect the appropriate level and discipline, align with relevant regulations governing professional practice, and be substantiated convincingly and traceably in national and international terms. Validation also examines their horizontal and vertical alignment with related programmes and whether they meet societal, scientific and disciplinary expectations.

Within the Flemish quality assurance system, DLO have an important role in the division of responsibilities. Institutions must demonstrate that their programmes align with the validated DLO. They need not, however, establish separately for every programme that its intended learning outcomes meet national and international expectations concerning level, content and orientation: that substantiation takes place at the common DLO level. This

avoids unnecessary repetition of quality assurance activities while allowing institutions to interpret the shared learning outcomes in line with their own educational vision and programme profile.

Institutional reviews show that, within their own conduct, institutions attend to the translation of DLO into programme-specific learning outcomes, curricula and the attainment level to be achieved. The own conduct must safeguard the coherence of these elements and detect and remedy any shortcomings. It also has a signalling role when developments in a discipline, profession or society call the relevance and topicality of the DLO themselves into question.

Responsibility for current and relevant DLO does not end with their initial validation. Higher education institutions are collectively responsible for keeping them up to date. Rapid scientific, societal and technological developments, artificial intelligence is a current example, may lead programmes to update their curricula and programme-specific learning outcomes faster than the shared DLO. Where results and findings from the own conduct or external quality assurance show that existing DLO no longer adequately reflect these developments, this should prompt collective consideration of whether they need updating and, if necessary, reformulation and a new validation procedure. Changes to professional regulations may also require an update.

The NVAO finds, however, that feedback from institutions' own conduct to the shared DLO level is not yet sufficiently systematic. Although institutions continuously develop their programmes, this does not automatically lead to collective reflection on whether the DLO remain current. Moreover, DLO validation decisions have no expiry date, and there is no structural requirement to consider periodically whether an update is necessary.

This concerns a fundamental condition for the Flemish quality assurance system. The trust on which it rests presupposes not only effective own conduct, but also current and relevant shared reference points. If DLO do not keep pace with developments in programmes and disciplines, the substantive basis for comparing qualifications, and for the quality assurance built upon it, is weakened.

The NVAO therefore considers it necessary to embed the updating of DLO more firmly in the quality assurance system. This requires a periodic, demonstrable assessment of their topicality and relevance, informed by the results of the own conduct and external quality assurance. A clear, transparent validation framework is also needed to clarify expectations concerning how DLO are developed, substantiated and updated. This would strengthen institutions' collective ownership and safeguard the reliability of DLO as a shared foundation of the Flemish quality assurance system. Without that foundation, a quality assurance system based on institutional reviews would be undermined.

## 4.7 Conditions serve a remedial and clarifying purpose

Through positive decisions with limited validity, the NVAO makes clear where the quality assurance system considers an additional safeguard necessary. In five cases, the NVAO imposed conditions and therefore issued decisions with limited validity. The conditions concerned core aspects of the own conduct: formal confirmation of programme quality; the availability of current, realistic and valid public information; involvement of independent external experts; and the governance or organisational arrangements needed for sustainable confirmation of quality. These decisions affirm that trust in the own conduct must be accompanied by demonstrable evidence, public accountability and confirmation decisions by institutional leadership.

Follow-up of positive decisions with limited validity also demonstrates the remedial role of conditions. They do not represent a departure from NVAO's Appreciative Approach. Rather, within a system based on trust, they identify what elements an institution must demonstrably strengthen in the short term. They clarify the boundary between enhancement-oriented recommendations and the safeguards necessary for the own conduct to work effectively.

## 4.8 Further development calls mainly for refinement, not systemic change

For the NVAO, this cycle confirms that major changes to the quality assurance system are unnecessary. This conclusion follows from the assessment reports and is consistent with the external evaluation and the NVAO's follow-up. The system's underlying philosophy remains sound: trust, own conduct, external peer review, public accountability and continuous enhancement. Further development should therefore consolidate and deepen the existing system, with targeted improvements where its operation, transparency or proportionality can be strengthened.

Sustainable own conduct also requires institutional memory and continuity. As quality assurance systems develop, it becomes increasingly important to retain knowledge of their underlying principles, previous assessments, policy choices and the links between the different elements of the institution's own conduct. Staff turnover or organisational change must not result in the loss of that knowledge. Professional development, clear responsibilities and effective handover therefore remain important conditions.

For institutions, the principal areas for development concern stronger links between the various elements of the own conduct: stakeholder involvement and external expertise; analysis and follow-up; and confirmation decisions and public information. Visible feedback loops, workable processes and sustainable retention of knowledge and responsibilities remain important.

For the NVAO, the principal areas for development are further clarifying expectations and concepts, maintaining a balance between rigour and proportionality, strengthening the structure and traceability of reporting, and supporting consistent application of NVAO's Appreciative Approach across panels and procedures.

It remains essential to distinguish equal treatment from direct comparability between institutions. The system treats institutions as equal, not identical: their contexts, scale, missions and organisational forms differ. Consistency should therefore not be sought in uniform outcomes or wholly standardised assessment reports, but in a shared assessment philosophy, a rigorous and consistently applied methodology, and traceable decision-making.

## 4.9 Compliance with regulations governing access to certain posts or professions

Compliance with relevant regulations governing access to certain posts or professions is addressed explicitly in only a limited number of assessment reports. A panel discussed it most extensively in the maritime context, where international and federal regulations directly affect certificates of competence and authorisation to serve at sea. One panel also raised it explicitly in a university of applied sciences (and arts) report, and it appears briefly but clearly in a university assessment report concerning European regulations on professional qualifications. In other reports, the issue generally remains implicit (for example, through professional qualifications, requirements of the professional field or

regulated programme contexts) without a systematic link to confirmation decisions. This does not mean that panels did not examine it in the other institutional reviews. Compliance with relevant professional regulations is an important part of the public accountability expected of institutions. How they fulfil this responsibility within their own conduct will therefore receive more explicit attention in the 2025–2031 quality assurance system.

## 4.10 Concluding insight

This overview report confirms two parallel developments. Institutions have made meaningful use of the elbow room and responsibility provided by the quality assurance system. At the same time, the second cycle shows that trust remains sustainable when accompanied by transparency, demonstrable confirmation of quality, visible external involvement, substantive relevance and intelligible public accountability.

The challenge for the 2025–2031 cycle is to deepen and consolidate these principles. For institutions, this means continuing to take ownership of quality assurance, basing confirmation decisions on integrated analyses of relevant information, and making programme quality visible in a transparent manner. For the NVAO, it means setting clear expectations, conducting consistent assessments sensitive to context, and maintaining dialogue with institutions and other stakeholders.

For the government, the challenge is to support the system's underlying philosophy with sufficient stability and coherence while leaving room for institutional responsibility and the NVAO's independent role. Further development of the system therefore also requires continuing policy-level dialogue about proportionality, transparency and public trust.

Higher education continues to evolve. Microcredentials, artificial intelligence, new forms of international cooperation and further developments in European quality assurance bring new challenges. The NVAO is following these developments closely and, together with stakeholders, intends to continue examining their possible implications for the scope and design of the institutional review. Only through continuing dialogue will the institutional review remain relevant to all stakeholders.

# 5 Appendices

## 5.1 Appendix 1: Overview Flemish universities and universities of applied sciences (and arts)

| | |
|---|---|
| AP | AP University of Applied Sciences and Arts |
| Artevelde | Artevelde University of Applied Sciences |
| EhB | Erasmus Brussels University of Applied Sciences and Arts |
| HOGENT | HOGENT University of Applied Sciences and Arts |
| Howest | Howest University of Applied Sciences |
| HZS | Antwerp Maritime Academy |
| Karel de Grote | Karel de Grote University of Applied Sciences and Arts |
| KU Leuven | Katholieke Universiteit Leuven |
| LUCA | LUCA School of Arts |
| Odisee | Odisee University of Applied Sciences |
| PXL | PXL University of Applied Sciences and Arts |
| Thomas More | Thomas More Kempen & Thomas More Mechelen-Antwerpen |
| UAntwerpen | University of Antwerp |
| UCLL | UC Leuven & UC Limburg |
| UGent | Ghent University |
| UHasselt | Hasselt University & Transnational University Limburg |
| VIVES | VIVES University of Applied Sciences |
| VUB | Free University Brussels |

## 5.2 Appendix 2: Timeline institutional reviews

| | 2021 | | | | 2022 | | | | 2023 | | | | 2024 | | | | | 2025 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | jan - mar | apr - jun | jul - sep | oct - dec | jan - mar | apr - jun | jul - sep | oct - dec | jan - mar | apr - jun | jul - sep | oct - dec | jan - mar | apr - jun | jul - sep | oct - dec | jan - mar | apr - jun | jul - sep | oct - dec |
| AP* | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | | 5 |
| Artevelde | | | | | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4, 5 | | | | | | | | | | |
| EhB | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 | 2 | | 3, 4, 5 | | |
| HOGENT | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4, 5 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Howest | | | | | | | | | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4, 5 | | | | | | |
| HZS (1) | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4, 5 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| HZS (2) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4, 5 | | |
| KdG | | | | | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4, 5 | | | | | | | | | | |
| KU Leuven | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| LUCA* | | | | | | | | | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | | | 5 | | | |
| Odisee (1) | | | | | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4, 5 | | | | | | | | | | |
| Odisee (2) | | | | | | | | | | | 1, 3, 4 | 5 | | | | | | | | |
| PXL | | | | | | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4, 5 | | | | | | | | | |
| Thomas More | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4, 5 | | |
| UAntwerpen | | | 1 | 2, 3, 4 | 5 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| UCLL | | | | | | | | | | | 1 | 2 | 3, 4 | 5 | | | | | | |
| UGent | | | | | | | 1 | 2, 3 | 4, 5 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| UHasselt | | | | | 1, 2 | 3 | 4, 5 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| VIVES (1) | | | | | | | | | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4, 5 | | | | | | |
| VIVES (2) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1, 2 | | 3, 4, 5 | | |
| VUB | | 1, 2 | | 3, 4 | 5 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

*1 = Application with Critical Reflection, 2 = Exploratory dialogue, 3 = In-depth dialogue, 4 = Assessment report, 5 = Decision-making NVAO. *The limited institutional review for these institutions takes place in academic year 2026-2027.*

## 5.3 Appendix 3: Composition of the assessment panels

| | |
|---|---|
| AP University of Applied Sciences and Arts | • Fons Leroy (chair), former managing director of VDAB.<br>• Yvette Michotte (panel member), emeritus professor of Pharmaceutical Chemistry and former Vice-Rector for Educational Policy at Free University Brussels.<br>• Rob Verhofstad (panel member), chair of the Executive Board of HAN University of Applied Sciences.<br>• Dries Myny (panel member), director of nursing and allied health professions at Onze Lieve Vrouw van Lourdes Hospital in Waregem.<br>• Liesl De Pauw (student panel member), master's student in Psychology at Free University Brussels. |
| Artevelde University of Applied Sciences | • Cis Van Den Bogaert (chair), former head of the Department of Education at the University of Antwerp.<br>• Ineke van Oldeniel (panel member), former vice-chair of the Executive Board of Saxion University of Applied Sciences and vice-chair of the Supervisory Board of Twente.<br>• Katrien Van Valckenborgh (panel member), education and student coordinator at the Faculty of Economics and Business, KU Leuven.<br>• Mieke Beckers (panel member), quality supervision coordinator in the Inspection Division of the Flemish Government Department of Work and Social Economy.<br>• Dieter De Laet (student panel member), bachelor's student in Finance and Insurance at Karel de Grote University of Applied Sciences and Arts. |
| Erasmus Brussels University of Applied Sciences and Arts | • Susana Menendez (chair), chair of the Supervisory Board of the University of the Arts The Hague.<br>• Jan Vanhoof (panel member), professor in the Department of Education and Training Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Antwerp.<br>• Sophie Péters (panel member), Associate Dean for International Affairs at ICHEC Brussels Management School.<br>• Jonas De Raeve (panel member), advocacy director at Voka – Limburg Chamber of Commerce and former education adviser at Voka's national research and advocacy centre.<br>• Aysema Poyraz (student panel member), master's student in Public Administration at Ghent University. |
| HOGENT University of | • Hans van der Vlist (chair), former Secretary-General of the Netherlands Ministry of Education, Culture and |

| | |
|---|---|
| Applied Sciences and Arts | Science and Director-General of the Netherlands Ministry of Justice and Security.<br>• Cis Van Den Bogaert (panel member), former head of the Department of Education at the University of Antwerp.<br>• Yvette Michotte (panel member), emeritus professor of Pharmaceutical Chemistry and former Vice-Rector for Educational Policy at Free University Brussels.<br>• Rihab Hajjaji (panel member), founder of PEP! vzw.<br>• Fien Cox (student panel member), master's student in Healthcare Management and Policy at Ghent University and graduate of the bachelor's programme in Medical Imaging and Radiotherapy at Odisee University of Applied Sciences. |
| PXL University of Applied Sciences and Arts | • Yvette Michotte (chair), emeritus professor of Pharmaceutical Chemistry and former Vice-Rector for Educational Policy at Free University Brussels.<br>• Antonia Aelterman (panel member), honorary senior lecturer at Ghent University, previously in the Department of Educational Studies.<br>• Susana Menendez (panel member), chair of the Supervisory Board of the University of the Arts The Hague.<br>• Thibaud Dedier (panel member), managing director and change manager at THD Management and project-based chief operating officer at Open VLD.<br>• Fien Cox (student panel member), master's student in Healthcare Management and Policy at Ghent University and graduate of the bachelor's programme in Medical Imaging and Radiotherapy at Odisee University of Applied Sciences. |
| Howest University of Applied Sciences | • Mia Sas (chair until the exploratory site visit), former director-general of Odisee University of Applied Sciences.<br>• Ann Demeulemeester (co-chair from the in-depth site visit), managing director of Familiehulp vzw, member of the Board of Directors of Odisee University of Applied Sciences and former vice-chair of the NVAO.<br>• Suzanne Koster (co-chair from the in-depth site visit), education manager at Dordrecht Academy, senior policy adviser for educational development and quality at RAC, and board member of CHAIN 5.<br>• Jan Vanhoof (panel member), professor in the Department of Education and Training Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Antwerp. |

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| | • Jesse Verleije (panel member), quality coordinator at the Duffel University Psychiatric Centre.<br>• Brent Pauwels (student panel member), bachelor's student in Electronics and ICT at Odisee University of Applied Sciences. |
| Antwerp Maritime Academy | • Eric Halsberghe (chair, 2022 institutional review and 2025 reassessment), former director-general of VIVES University of Applied Sciences.<br>• Patrick Audenaerde (panel member, 2022 institutional review and 2025 reassessment), quality manager and prevention adviser at Havenbedrijf Gent, and freelance lead auditor of ISO 9001 quality systems at SGS.<br>• Sofie Landuyt (panel member, 2022 institutional review and 2025 reassessment), director of the education expertise network at Artevelde University of Applied Sciences.<br>• Gerrit van Leunen (panel member, 2022 institutional review and 2025 reassessment), director of the Willem Barentsz Maritime Institute and Maritime Simulator Training Centre at NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences.<br>• Stijn Van Esbroeck (student panel member, 2022 institutional review), student in the educational bachelor's programme at Artevelde University of Applied Sciences.<br>• Andreas Vandingenen (student panel member, 2025 reassessment), master's student in History at KU Leuven. |
| Karel de Grote University of Applied Sciences and Arts | • Eric Halsberghe (chair), former director-general of VIVES University of Applied Sciences.<br>• Veerle Hulpiau (panel member), head of the Centre of Expertise in Education at the KU Leuven, Faculty of Medicine.<br>• Ingrid Lieten (panel member), director of Verso Social Profit and former Flemish Minister for Innovation, Public Investment, Media and Poverty Reduction.<br>• Mariska Wit (panel member), director of Rotterdam Business School at Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences.<br>• Timon Hast (student panel member), master's student in Political Communication at the University of Antwerp and graduate of the bachelor's programme in Journalism at Artevelde University of Applied Sciences. |

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| VIVES University of Applied Sciences | • Jan Bogerd (chair, 2024 institutional review and 2025 reassessment), interim Executive Board member at Avans University of Applied Sciences, former chair of the Executive Board of HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht, and vice-chair of the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences.<br>• Lien Mampaey (panel member, 2024 institutional review and 2025 reassessment), director of educational policy and quality assurance at Hasselt University.<br>• Mariska Wit (panel member, 2024 institutional review and 2025 reassessment), director of Rotterdam Business School at Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences.<br>• Vincent Van Malderen (panel member, 2024 institutional review), chief executive officer of Poolstok.<br>• Hendrik Van Gansbeke (panel member, 2025 reassessment), general coordinator of Wit-Gele Kruis van Vlaanderen.<br>• Kamila Petermannova (student panel member, 2024 institutional review), student at Karel de Grote University of Applied Sciences and Arts.<br>• Ruben Scholtis (student panel member, 2025 reassessment), master's student in Educational Sciences at Ghent University and graduate of the bachelor's programme in Social Work at HOGENT University of Applied Sciences and Arts. |
| KU Leuven | • Sarah Springman (chair), former Rector of ETH Zurich, Professor of Geotechnical Engineering and Principal of St Hilda's College, Oxford.<br>• Nora de Leeuw (panel member), Dean of the Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences at the University of Leeds.<br>• Agneta Bladh (panel member), chair of the Board of the Swedish Research Council, former Rector of the University of Kalmar and former Swedish State Secretary for Higher Education and Research.<br>• Jonas De Raeve (panel member), advocacy director at Voka – Limburg Chamber of Commerce and former education adviser at Voka's national research and advocacy centre.<br>• Kristin Bartik (panel member), professor and diplomatic adviser to the Rector at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), and former Vice-Rector for University Strategy and Institutional Relations at ULB. |

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| | • Anthony Longo (student panel member), master's student in Digital Culture and Society at King's College London and doctoral student at the University of Antwerp. |
| LUCA School of Arts | • Eric Halsberghe (chair), former director-general of VIVES University of Applied Sciences.<br>• Heleen Jumelet (panel member), chair of the Executive Board of HKU University of the Arts Utrecht.<br>• Susana Menendez (panel member), chair of the Supervisory Board of the University of the Arts The Hague.<br>• Frederik Styns (panel member), former intendant of the Flanders Symphony Orchestra.<br>• Liedewij Hermans (student panel member), student at Artevelde University of Applied Sciences. |
| Odisee University of Applied Sciences | • Hans van der Vlist (chair), former Secretary-General of the Netherlands Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and former Director-General of the Netherlands Ministry of Justice and Security.<br>• Sophie Péters (panel member), Associate Dean for International Affairs at ICHEC Brussels Management School.<br>• Jan Vanhoof (panel member), professor in the Department of Education and Training Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Antwerp.<br>• Fons Leroy (panel member), former managing director of VDAB.<br>• Aysema Poyraz (student panel member), bachelor's student in Finance and Insurance at HOGENT University of Applied Sciences and Arts. |
| Thomas More | • Jan Bogerd (chair), interim Executive Board member at Avans University of Applied Sciences, former chair of the Executive Board of HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht, and board member and vice-chair of the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences.<br>• Mariska Wit (panel member), director of Rotterdam Business School at Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences.<br>• Veerle Hulpiau (panel member), head of the Centre of Expertise in Education at the KU Leuven, Faculty of Medicine.<br>• Karel Van Eetvelt (panel member), manager of the Brussels division of Hill&Knowlton International, co- |

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| | owner of The Cykl, board member of organisations including Matexi, former managing director of UNIZO and former chief executive officer of Febelfin.<br>• Mattias Niels (student panel member), student in the educational master's programme in Science and Technology at Ghent University. |
| University of Antwerp | • Fons Leroy (chair), former managing director of VDAB.<br>• Frank van der Duijn Schouten (panel member), chair of the Executive Board of the Open Universiteit, former interim Rector Magnificus of Erasmus University Rotterdam, and former Rector Magnificus of Tilburg University and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.<br>• Antonia Aelterman (panel member), honorary senior lecturer at Ghent University, previously in the Department of Educational Studies.<br>• Bernard Coulie (panel member), former Rector of Université catholique de Louvain and professor of Armenian, Georgian and Byzantine Studies and European history, culture, integration and identity.<br>• Liesl De Pauw (student panel member), master's student in Psychology at Free University Brussels. |
| UC Leuven & UC Limburg | • Fons Leroy (chair), former managing director of VDAB.<br>• Yvette Michotte (panel member), emeritus professor of Pharmaceutical Chemistry and former Vice-Rector for Educational Policy at Free University Brussels.<br>• Rob Verhofstad (panel member), chair of the Executive Board of HAN University of Applied Sciences.<br>• Dries Myny (panel member), director of nursing and allied health professions at Onze Lieve Vrouw van Lourdes Hospital in Waregem, and guest professor at Ghent University.<br>• Lisa Ronsyn (student panel member), graduate of the master's programme in Biochemistry and Biotechnology at Ghent University. |
| Ghent University | • Agneta Bladh (chair), chair of the Board of the Swedish Research Council, former Rector of the University of Kalmar and former Swedish State Secretary for Higher Education and Research.<br>• Bernard Coulie (panel member), former Rector of Université catholique de Louvain and professor of Armenian, Georgian and Byzantine Studies and European history, culture, integration and identity.<br>• Ann Demeulemeester (panel member), managing director of Familiehulp vzw, member of the Board of |

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| | Directors of Odisee University of Applied Sciences and former vice-chair of the NVAO.<br>• Marja Sutela (panel member), Vice-Rector for Education at Tampere University.<br>• Frank van der Duijn Schouten (panel member), chair of the Executive Board of the Open Universiteit, former interim Rector Magnificus of Erasmus University Rotterdam, and former Rector Magnificus of Tilburg University and Free University Amsterdam.<br>• Pepijn Nollet (student panel member), graduate of the master's programmes in Public Management and History at KU Leuven. |
| Hasselt University & Transnational University Limburg | • Elmer Sterken (chair), Professor of Monetary Economics and former Rector Magnificus of the University of Groningen.<br>• Antonia Aelterman (panel member), honorary senior lecturer at Ghent University, previously in the Department of Educational Studies.<br>• Frank van der Duijn Schouten (panel member), chair of the Executive Board of the Open Universiteit, former interim Rector Magnificus of Erasmus University Rotterdam, and former Rector Magnificus of Tilburg University and Free University Amsterdam.<br>• Raymonda Verdyck (panel member), former managing director of GO! Education.<br>• Sofie Férauge (student panel member), master's student in Engineering Sciences: Chemistry and Materials at Free University Brussels. |
| Free University of Brussels | • Elmer Sterken (chair), Professor of Monetary Economics and former Rector Magnificus of the University of Groningen.<br>• Eric Halsberghe (panel member), former director-general of VIVES University of Applied Sciences.<br>• Nora de Leeuw (panel member), Dean of the Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences at the University of Leeds.<br>• Ingrid Lieten (panel member), director of Verso Social Profit and former Flemish Minister for Innovation, Public Investment, Media and Poverty Reduction.<br>• Angela Brinkman (student panel member), master's student in Applied Economics at the University of Antwerp. |

## Colofon

NVAO FL • Overview report

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW

*2025-2025*

October 2026

NVAO

**Accreditatieorganisatie van Nederland, Vlaanderen en Luxemburg**
**Accreditation Organisation of The Netherlands, Flanders and Luxembourg**

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