



NVAO • THE NETHERLANDS

# FURTHER ELABORATION

ASSESSMENT BY A PANEL OF PEERS

MARCH 2020



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# 1 Introduction

The accreditation system in Dutch higher education is based on *peer review*, the assessment of the educational quality of programmes by a panel of peers and students, in which accountability and improvement go hand in hand. The reliability and validity of this assessment by peers is of the utmost importance for the trust and confidence in the accreditation system.

Under the NVAO accreditation framework 2018 (Sections 2.3 and 4.4.4.), NVAO is responsible for elaborating the *performance* of a peer review in a way that ensures a consistent and reliable assessment. To ensure a consistent and reliable assessment through peer review, it is necessary to provide clarity about the design and preparation of the review, the working method of a panel and the conduct of panel members. This detailed elaboration is intended to provide as much clarity as possible by providing more practicable guidance and making it clear how peer review, as an instrument, can be applied in the best possible way. To this end, the different stages in the panel's assessment process are dealt with below in chronological order.

This elaboration is intended for all those involved in preparing, performing and following up assessments by peers. First – for teaching staff, students and staff of a study programme – this elaboration provides the information required to gain a better understanding of the working method and preparation of a panel for an assessment procedure. This elaboration is equally intended for panel members, secretaries and assessment agencies tasked with supervising an assessment procedure and serves to make them aware of the principles of peer review and what is expected of them in an assessment.

This elaboration focuses on the assessment of existing programmes during an assessment procedure. In a general sense, the starting points described here also apply to the initial accreditation as well as to assessments such as the Institutional Audit, although these require different emphases on some points. NVAO will regularly update this document so that it reflects the most recent regulations and the desired performance of assessments. Stakeholders will be informed about this.

## 2 Preparation and performance of the assessment by the panel and the secretary

### 2.1 Peer review

When assessing higher education programmes, NVAO applies the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). This international agreement on the organisation of quality assurance in higher education in Europe, to which the Netherlands is committed, stipulates that assessments should be carried out by external, independent experts (peers) who provide multifaceted perspectives.

#### ESG (2015) 2.4

**Standard:**

External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s).

**Guidelines:**

At the core of external quality assurance is the wide range of expertise provided by peer experts, who contribute to the work of the agency through input from various perspectives, including those of institutions, academics, students and employers/professional practitioners. (...)

The NVAO accreditation framework consists – based in part on the ESG – of open standards that specify which aspects of education are assessed. The framework does not prescribe how institutions providing the educational programmes should elaborate these aspects. Institutions are free to make their own choices regarding the structure and layout of educational programmes, the didactics applied and the assessment methods used.

Peer review is aimed at accountability as well as improvement. The panel assesses whether the quality of education is sufficiently in keeping with the standards of the accreditation framework and with the standards for educational contents and the learning outcomes achieved in a particular discipline. In doing so, the assessors take the vision and objectives of an educational programme as a starting point and the assessors are open to the choices made by the institution providing the programme. Such a method of assessment does not mean that the panel cannot express a critical opinion. It is precisely because the panel takes the approach and choices made in the programme as a starting point that it can identify any blind spots or weaknesses in the programme and indicate how the institution could achieve the basic principles of the programme even better.

Peers take their own experience and preferences into account in the assessment. By establishing panels involving multiple assessors with different backgrounds and expertise, preparing them well for their work and making them aware of the danger of bias, group but also individual subjectivity is reduced. It is essential for the improvement function of accreditation that the panel consists of subject-matter experts who can provide valuable and context-rich feedback.

## 2.2 Secretary/process coordinator

*(The term 'secretary' as used below denotes the person who supervises the panel and coordinates the assessment process. If the secretary is only responsible for writing the report, someone else takes on the role of process coordinator. That set out below applies to both roles.)*

The secretary<sup>1</sup> is not involved in the educational programme being assessed and is not a member of the panel. The secretary must satisfy certain requirements in the area of expertise and professionalism; see the Guideline on professional competence of secretaries drawn up by NVAO. The secretary follows a course provided by NVAO and keeps their professional knowledge up to date through refresher courses at NVAO or otherwise and by regularly taking part in assessments.

It is the secretary's task to ensure that the assessment process is formally correct and to provide a report on it. The panel is jointly responsible for reporting. In addition, the secretary assists the panel and communicates with the institution that provides the educational programme.

The secretary has an important role in preparing the panel for the process. The secretary invites the panel for the preliminary consultation, collects the panel members' first impressions and incorporates these into an overview that is discussed during the preliminary consultation. The secretary makes sure that the panel members will act in line with each other in advance by discussing the accreditation framework with panel members and defining the concept of generic quality. Where necessary, the secretary instructs the chair.

The secretary sees to it that the framework and principles of peer review are applied, both in preparing the panel, during the site visit and during formulation of the conclusion. During the site visit, the programme department can address the secretary about the panel's working method. The secretary corrects the panel if this is required in view of the framework or proper performance of the peer review, for example if the principle that the programme's vision, objectives and choices should be the starting point of the interviews is in danger of being compromised. In that case, the panel chair is the point of contact for the secretary.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'secretary' is not gender-specific. In this document the secretary is only referred to as 'he' purely for readability purposes.

### 3 Composition of the panel

Peers are authoritative experts in their field of expertise who are well acquainted with the current practice of the educational programme they are assessing. They are open to innovation and development in education. A panel of peers comprises experts in several disciplines, such as national (and international) education, assessment, professional field, student perspective and experience in assessment procedures. Panels tasked with assessing large clusters often include an educational expert with knowledge of the specific discipline. Our preference is for these competencies to be distributed across several panel members so as to enable dialogue within the panel. Peers are independent; they have no ties with the institution or an advisory body that organises the assessment.

In the case of large clusters of programmes in a particular discipline that focus on different sub-disciplines within that discipline, a panel may be composed of a core panel and, in addition, referees for the specific subject-matter assessment, such as clusters of programmes in modern languages or teacher training courses. Referees must meet the same requirements of competence and independence as panel members.

NVAO has a procedure for the approval of panels. The Panel Composition Guideline 2018 (Richtlijn panelsamenstelling Kader 2018) sets out the requirements panel members must satisfy and how institutions can apply for approval. You can find information about this on NVAO's website.

#### Division of roles

The division of roles in a panel is as follows. The chair ensures that the procedure is carried out correctly and that the assessment is balanced. The chair also directs the group process leading to the conclusion, allowing plenty of scope for input from other panel members. Furthermore, the chair is tasked with communicating clearly with the programme department and with other panel members and is also the point of contact for the secretary. The student member is a full member of the panel who considers the programme in particular from a student perspective, although is not the only panel member to do so.

The panel chair provides guidance to the assessment in terms of content and procedure and ensures that the principles of peer review are applied in practice. In any case, NVAO expects the following competencies from the panel chair, which are also covered in the training session for the chair:

- the chair supervises an authoritative substantive assessment based on the educational programme department's own objectives and didactic choices, taking into account the open standards and regulations in the NVAO accreditation framework;
- the chair promotes a rigorous group process within the panel;
- the chair applies and monitors goal-oriented audit skills;
- the chair ensures a balanced assessment process;
- the chair applies and monitors sound formulation of the panel's conclusion;
- the chair has good communication skills;
- the chair maintains and monitors the panel's independence.

The chair undergoes training in how to chair the panel. Different scenarios are possible in this respect:

- the chair is trained by the assessment agency if the educational programme department performs the assessment procedure with an assessment agency, or
- the chair is trained by NVAO if the educational programme department performs the assessment procedure without an assessment agency, or
- the chair is trained by the secretary if the educational programme department performs the assessment procedure without an assessment agency.

If the educational programme department performs the assessment procedure without an assessment agency, the educational programme department will contact NVAO to discuss in which of the above ways the chair's training will take place.

The panel is well acquainted with the system and framework within which it performs an assessment; it is familiar with the principles of peer review and discusses these during the preparatory process. The panel knows what is expected of peers in terms of knowledge and conduct. The secretary or process coordinator assisting the panel ensures that all panel members are well informed about their activities and the conduct expected of them.

#### Code of conduct and profile

NVAO has drawn up a code of conduct in which it sets out the attitude it expects panel members to adopt during an assessment. NVAO applies the 'profile of a chair' in training chairs; this profile describes the tasks and desired conduct of the chair. Both documents can be found on NVAO's website. They are also handed out to panel members before the assessment.



## 4 Preparation of the panel

### 4.1 Preliminary consultation

The panel ensures it is well informed about the NVAO accreditation framework, which is the starting point for the assessment. It reviews the self-evaluation and other documentation before a site visit. Panel members individually record their impressions of each programme through an assessment form. It is important that panel members do this individually to avoid group pressure.

The panel holds a preliminary consultation (of approximately two hours) before the site visit. During the preliminary consultation, the secretary or process coordinator discusses the NVAO accreditation framework with the panel and provides explanations where necessary. The purpose of fine-tuning is to ensure that all panel members have the same idea and understanding of the standards of the framework.

In the preliminary consultation, the panel discusses whether it has a good understanding of the programme and its uniqueness as well as the choices the programme department has made with regard to its educational quality. The panel discusses its impressions and formulates the questions it wishes to raise during the site visit. To this end, the panel formulates a 'search strategy' aimed at finding out what the panel already knows, what else it wants to know and how it will seek this information. During this process, the panel discusses which conversations and questions are conducive to finding the answers. These questions are not intended to 'provoke a response' from other panel members or to gather information that can also be found elsewhere. The panel should specifically ask for missing or unclear elements. The panel compiles a questionnaire which is kept up to date by the secretary and the chair during the interviews.

If, in a cluster assessment, a panel of varying composition (sub-panels) performs the assessment, the panel ensures sufficient coordination and fine-tuning between the sub-panels before arriving at its conclusion. The panel indicates, in the report, the manner in which coordination has taken place.

### 4.2 Study of theses

Part of the panel's preparatory tasks is to study theses. This does not involve a re-assessment of the theses or an assessment of the student but an assessment of the programme's assessment system. Possible questions in this context are whether the theses demonstrate the achievement of the intended learning outcomes, whether the assessment by assessors is consistent and whether students receive adequate feedback. Is the grade given reproducible according to the programme's own standards? And does that assessment reflect the views of peers?

Assessment of theses in cluster-based assessment procedures is predicated on a panel being able to assess each programme separately and studying the theses of at least 15 graduates per programme. The NVAO accreditation framework describes the procedure for selection of theses.

Ultimately, the panel determines the number of theses selected for the procedure (of at least 15 graduates), taking into account that it must be able to give a well-founded assessment of the achieved learning outcomes of the programme in all its forms and pathways. The number of 15 graduates is a minimum. In its report, the panel indicates how it arrived at the selection and how it is representative of the programme in all its forms.

In situations where fewer than 15 recent theses are available to assess and the panel nevertheless needs to arrive at a substantiated assessment of the learning outcomes achieved on the basis of a representative set of theses, the panel may also select a smaller number of recent theses if these were completed after the previous assessment procedure.

When studying the theses, the panel applies the 'four-eyes' principle as much as possible and discusses the findings among its members. Theses about which there is doubt as to whether the cut-off point between a sufficient or insufficient grade has been sufficiently applied by the programme department are in any case read by at least one other panel member. Should the panel find that a department has, in the panel's opinion, wrongly assessed a thesis as sufficient, the panel will consider whether it should look at more theses. This consideration must be described in the report.

The panel ensures that it concludes its study of theses before the preliminary consultation and discusses the panel members' impressions of the theses during the preliminary consultation. During the site visit, panel members consult with theses supervisors to gain more insight into the method of assessment and grading by the programme department. The advisory report does not include student numbers or other traceable data of graduates whose theses have been studied.

#### Fewer theses available

NVAO has a regulation on its website for cases where there are fewer than 15 theses available per programme for the panel to study. This is an exceptional situation, the application of which must be justified in the report.

## 5 Panel's approach during the site visit

An open and respectful attitude on the part of peers is essential for a constructive dialogue with the programme department. Only then will a programme department feel free to respond openly and honestly to the panel's questions. The panel must provide a safe environment for the interviews; NVAO also emphasises this in the code of conduct for panel members. This relates to how panel members treat the documents provided to the panel and the panel's attitude during the dialogue with the programme department.

Asking open questions and listening carefully to what the programme department has to say are essential for good peer review. The panel should be open about its role – it must clearly indicate the purpose of the questions it asks and avoid strategic behaviour. The panel may choose to give its first impressions of the programme or any points for attention at the beginning of the interviews.

All panel members are expected to be present during the entire site visit, including the preliminary consultation and deliberations on the final conclusion. If this is not possible due to force majeure or unforeseen circumstances, the chair and the secretary will consult with the programme department to discuss whether the site visit can proceed. The student member must also be present.

As NVAO must be able to determine whether the assessment has taken place in accordance with the framework requirements, the panel's report should mention the presence of panel members during the site visit. In the event of unforeseen absence of a member, the panel should indicate in the report what steps it has taken to ensure the assessment has been performed satisfactorily. In the event of unforeseen absence of the secretary, the secretary will arrange for a replacement.

## 6 Conclusion by the panel

After completing the interviews, the panel deliberates on its final conclusion. The panel will not form its conclusion until it has thoroughly familiarised itself with the unique characteristics of the programme, has studied the information provided and has completed its interviews with representatives of the programme and with students.

Before the panel delivers its final conclusion, panel members formulate their individual opinions on each standard, including a substantiation of these opinions. In doing so, they take into consideration the programme's strengths and weaknesses. Subsequently, the results are discussed in a plenary meeting at which all panel members are given the opportunity to express their views. The chair of the panel ensures that the panel's working methods and process of forming the final conclusion provide sufficient scope for this dialogue.

The panel aims to arrive at a conclusion on the basis of consensus. Where this is not possible but there is a majority opinion nonetheless, the majority opinion will prevail. If desired, panel members can indicate whether they would like their minority opinion to be included in the report.

In forming the conclusion, the secretary ensures that the assessment is based on the applicable standards and that the panel puts forward sufficient findings and considerations for the secretary to draw up the report. If the panel does not reach a consensus, the secretary describes the process of reaching the final conclusion in the report.

After the panel has reached its final conclusion, the panel provides the programme department with feedback on the main points of the conclusion; and the final conclusion is included in the report. The panel may postpone this feedback if it wishes to consult further with sub-panels within a cluster. In principle, the panel comes to a final conclusion during or as soon as possible after the site visit.

A conclusion on a standard should be reproducible according to findings and considerations in the report that are directly relevant to the standard in question. These are findings from the self-evaluation, from the interviews or from another source clearly identified in the report.

In the final conclusion, which concerns the generic quality assessed, the panel indicates the strengths and weaknesses of each standard and of the programme as a whole. It must be possible to deduce the standards of the NVAO accreditation framework from the conclusion; a shortcoming should be associated with only one standard and not repeated with multiple standards. The panel may provide recommendations for improvements, which always concern 'what' and not 'how', as a programme department will itself seek the best way to implement a recommendation or to disregard it with reasons provided.

## 7 Development meeting

The development meeting is part of the assessment of an existing programme. In this meeting, the panel and the programme department discuss the most important developments and improvement areas for the programme with a view to the future. The panel ensures that the development meeting provides a safe context in which to discuss dilemmas and future developments without any conclusion being drawn from this.

It is up to the programme department to determine, in consultation with the panel, when this development meeting will take place. It can take place on the same day as the site visit but it is also possible to schedule it for a different time. Under the NVAO accreditation framework and the law, the panel is responsible for reporting on the development meeting.

The report of the development meeting, which is appended to the report, will not be sent to NVAO.

### Legal basis for the development meeting

The legal basis for the development meeting is contained in Section 5.13(4)(c) and (6) of the (Dutch) Higher Education And Research Act (WHW):

- 4 The panel of experts draws up a report on the assessment procedure which contains:
  - a. an opinion on the quality aspects referred to in Section 5.12;
  - b. a summary of the assessment as well as a final conclusion;
  - c. an appendix with recommendations for further development of the programme.

(...)

6. The board of the institution will publish the appendix referred to in subsection 4(c) within one year after the accreditation organisation has adopted the accreditation report.

