

Criteria pertaining to
distinctive feature of
“Small-scale and
intensive education”
Specification

NVAO | Netherlands division
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This document elaborates the additional requirements associated with a specific NVAO assessment procedure referred to in the NVAO assessment framework. It also outlines the working method stipulated by the procedure.

Specification of the Criteria pertaining to the distinctive feature of “Small-scale and intensive education”

<i>Name of the procedure</i>	Specification of the criteria pertaining to the distinctive feature of “Small-scale and intensive education”
<i>Applicable to</i>	Programmes and curricula within programmes offering small-scale and intensive education
<i>Relating to</i>	Assessment framework for the Dutch higher education accreditation system 2016 (Government Gazette 20 December 2016 no. 69458)
<i>Expiry date</i>	N.A.
<i>History</i>	Amendment to the Assessment framework for the distinctive feature of small-scale and intensive education dated 4 November 2011 and the Guidelines to the assessment framework for the small-scale and intensive education distinctive feature (programmes other than Liberal Arts and Sciences) dated 12 November 2012
<i>Assessment fee</i>	nvao.net/nederland/tarieven
<i>Further information</i>	nvao.net/nederland/beoordelingskaders

Introduction

For small-scale, intensive and residential programmes (hereinafter referred to as: small-scale and intensive), and for such tracks that fall within a programme, under certain conditions the institution's board can select students and in combination with this impose tuition fees that are higher than those set down by law for standard programmes. The Minister of Education, Culture and Science must grant approval for this pursuant to Articles 6.7, 6.7a, 6.7b, and 6.7c of the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW). The Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) advises the Minister on granting such approval on the basis of an application for the distinctive feature of "Small-scale and intensive education".

The Minister's approval is granted on the basis of an initial assessment of a proposal submitted by an institution and valid for an indefinite period of time. Subsequently, the institution must have NVAO assess, on a one-off basis, whether it has realised its ambitions (NVAO practice-based assessment). The practice-based assessment must be conducted within six years after approval has been granted. Upon each re-accreditation, the distinctive feature must be re-granted by NVAO. The timeframe for the practice-based assessment is, in principle, aligned with the duration of the accreditation period, i.e., six years.

This further elaboration of the assessment framework for the Dutch higher education accreditation system sets out the requirements that a programme or track must fulfil in order to qualify for the distinctive feature of "Small-scale and intensive education". The document outlines the criteria, assessment rules, and procedures pertaining to the initial assessment, the practice-based assessment, and the re-granting of the distinctive feature upon re-accreditation of a programme.

Programmes or tracks featuring small-scale and intensive education are characterised by considerably more intensive teaching; education is intertwined with extra-curricular activities so that a "learning community" is created in which students and staff are much more closely involved with one another than is the case in standard curricula.

A distinguishing feature of this type of programme or track within a standard programme is that the learning outcomes are achieved in an inseparable connection between the curriculum and the social context. The stringent admission procedure is aimed at realising an optimal match between student and programme. In this respect, the focus is on academic and/or professional capacity and motivation. The small-scale nature of such programmes is an important condition for the realisation of high-level learning outcomes and the formation of a learning community.

In the event that the small-scale education only involves a track within a programme, the intended learning outcomes of such a track must be manifestly distinct, while the deliverance of such a track must overlap with the supporting, non-small-scale, and non-intensive programme to such an extent as to do sufficient and manifest justice to the small-scale and intensive education component within the track.

A recognisable separate educational environment including all related educational facilities is essential, as these support the learning community in which students and teachers are more directly involved with one another. The fact that the programmes offering small-scale and intensive education provide their students with an optimal education must be reflected in the achieved learning outcomes of the students and the success rates.

Following permission from the Minister of Education, Culture and Science, the university may impose up to five times the statutory tuition fee. However, it must have made arrangements with respect to the criteria and the procedure pertaining to dispensation for payment of the higher tuition fee.

Amendment

NVAO has been assessing distinctive feature applications since 2011. The amended criteria reflect the experience gained in these assessments. The amendment has primarily ensued from the necessity of aligning the criteria with the amended standard accreditation framework that came into force on 1 January 2017, which constitutes the main basis for these criteria. In addition, the wording of the criteria has been brought more into line with the interpretation of the assessment criteria as set down by NVAO in the “Guidelines to the assessment framework for the Small-scale and intensive education distinctive feature” dated 12 November 2012. This amendment is based on the same principles relating to small-scale and intensive education as adopted in earlier assessments.

The accreditation framework is based on confidence and, for that reason, ownership of the structure of external quality assurance assessments is placed more with the institution. Furthermore, the framework seeks to minimise the administrative burden. These points of departure also underpin the criteria pertaining to the distinctive feature of “Small-scale and intensive education”.

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1 Criteria

1.1 Description of the criteria

The criteria have been formulated in broad terms in order to afford the institutions maximum scope for creating a distinct profile based on topics of their own choice.

A. Intended learning outcomes

The objectives and intended learning outcomes are aimed at achieving an above-average level in one or more academic disciplines and/or professional practices in the domain concerned. In addition, the programme focuses on the broadening and development of related personal attitudes and skills.

B. Curriculum: contents

The curriculum and the extracurricular activities are inextricably bound. Their contents tie in with the intended level and the broadening as formulated in the intended learning outcomes. Students and staff share responsibility for the organisation of the extracurricular activities.

C. Curriculum: learning environment

The teaching concept is based on a challenging learning environment, education substantiated in a small-scale and intensive manner, and a learning community of students and staff. The small-scale and intense nature of the education is demonstrated by the level of participation and preparation that is expected from students. The curriculum is structured in such a manner as to ensure nominal study progress by the students, including extracurricular activities.

D. Intake

The programme has a sound selection procedure in place, aimed at admitting motivated and academically and/or professionally talented students, in which the criteria include suitability for and interest in the small-scale and intensive educational concept, in combination with extracurricular activities.

E. Staff

The number of staff is sufficient in terms of providing small-scale and intensive education, substantiating close contact between staff and students, and providing individual counselling to students outside the educational context. The staff demonstrably command the specific expertise and skills required to achieve the objectives of small-scale and intensive education. The programme actively monitors that teachers hold the required qualifications and, if necessary, ensures that teachers are trained in these aspects.

F. Facilities

The programme has its own infrastructure with facilities for small-scale and intensive education and common extra-curricular social activities.

G. Achieved learning outcomes

The content and the level of the tests and final projects are in line with the level and the broadening as set down in the intended learning outcomes. Graduates are admitted to demanding postgraduate programmes and/or jobs.

The success rates are substantially higher than those of other relevant programmes that do not carry the distinctive feature, and are at least on a par with other relevant programmes that have been granted this distinctive feature.

1.2 Judgements and assessment rules

In its advisory report, the panel observes the following assessment rules:

Initial assessment and extension prior to practice-based assessment

NVAO considers all the criteria equally important; its point of departure is that an institution must have demonstrated its satisfaction of the aggregate criteria in order to be able to provide small-scale and intensive education, with the exception of criterion G. If the assessment pertaining to extension of the distinctive feature is conducted prior to the practice-based assessment, the achieved learning outcomes and the success rates will be assessed on an ex-ante basis. In such situations, a panel will only verify whether the situation as existing at the time the feature was originally granted is still manifest.

The panel will score each criterion in terms of “meets the standard” or “does not meet the standard” (see the definition of judgements in the accreditation framework).

Criterion G is only assessed prospectively. In addition, the panel will provide a final conclusion of “positive” or “negative”, which is defined as:

- Positive: all the criteria are scored as “meets the standard”;
- Negative: one or more of the criteria are scored as “does not meet the standard”.

Practice-based assessment

NVAO assumes that the programme or track will have managed to achieve sufficient results in six years' time. The practice-based assessment reviews all the criteria, including the achieved learning outcomes (criterion G). The panel will score each criterion in terms of “meets the standard” or “does not meet the standard” (see the definition of judgements in the accreditation framework). In addition, the panel will provide a final conclusion of “positive” or “negative”, which is defined as:

- Positive: all the criteria are scored as “meets the standard”;
- Negative: one or more of the criteria are scored as “does not meet the standard”.

Extension upon accreditation following the practice-based assessment

NVAO assumes that in six years' time, small-scale and intensive education will have evolved into a quintessential feature of a programme or track. For that reason, the panel will take its assessment of the criteria into full account in its assessment in the purview of accreditation. This means that the achieved learning outcomes and the success rates of the programme or track will be taken into consideration in the scores awarded to the relevant standards and the final conclusion. The report will provide a clear picture of the panel's considerations with respect to the distinctive feature. In its final conclusion, the panel will indicate, in a substantiated manner, whether it is of the opinion that the award of the “Small-scale and intensive education” distinctive feature will be justified.

In this assessment, the panel will observe the assessment rules set out in the standard framework. An unsatisfactory score concerning the programme will also pertain to the distinctive feature and may be incorporated into an improvement plan and an improvement period. In the development interview during the site visit, the panel may include recommendations regarding the small-scale and intensive education.

1.3 NVAO decision-making

In all the assessments described above, NVAO will substantiate its own judgement based on the advisory report provided by the panel and additional information, if any. In the event that the application for the distinctive feature has been submitted within the context of a programme assessment, NVAO will take the coherence between the two assessments into consideration in its decision-making.

Following a positive result on the initial assessment, the NVAO decision will encompass the award of the distinctive feature and a recommendation to the Minister of Education, Culture and Science. In this recommendation, NVAO will indicate, on the basis of the panel advisory report, the timeframe it deems appropriate for the practice-based assessment and the points for attention that should be taken into consideration in this assessment. NVAO will forward the panel advisory report to the Minister.

Following a positive result on the practice-based assessment, the NVAO decision will encompass the extension of the distinctive feature granted and a recommendation to the Minister of Education, Culture and Science regarding the continuation of the Minister's approval pertaining to selection and the imposition of higher tuition fees.

Upon a negative final conclusion regarding a practice-based assessment, in which criterion G has been scored as "meets the standard" but one or two other standards have been scored as "does not meet the standard", and the panel indicates that a positive assessment (satisfactory score on all the standards) would be feasible within two years, NVAO offers the programme or the track the option of having those standards scored as unsatisfactory re-assessed within two years. To this end, NVAO will extend the award of the distinctive feature. The programme or track must submit a report on the reassessment to NVAO. NVAO only allows a single reassessment.

Upon a negative final conclusion regarding the practice-based assessment without the possibility of a reassessment, NVAO will withdraw the distinctive feature and recommend that the Minister of Education, Culture and Science withdraw his permission for pre-entry selection and the imposition of higher statutory tuition fees.

Pursuant to the Dutch General Administrative Law Act, NVAO decisions are open to internal and external appeals. More information is provided in the Appeals Procedure Regulations AwB NVAO on the NVAO website (www.nvao.net).

2 Assessment process

The assessment process is founded on the Assessment Framework for the Dutch Higher Education Accreditation System 2016 and Articles 6.7, 6.7a, 6.7b, and 6.7c of the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW). Additional matters are outlined in this specification.

2.1 Application

Initial assessment, practice-based assessment, and extension of the distinctive feature

The distinctive feature is subject to three different assessments: the initial assessment, the practice-based assessment, and the extension of the distinctive feature. The initial assessment and the practice-based assessment constitute the basis for a recommendation to the Minister of Education, Culture and Science to grant permission for pre-entry selection and the imposition of higher tuition fees. The extension of the distinctive feature is directly linked to the reaccreditation of the programme by NVAO.

An initial assessment is based on a proposal from the institution. With respect to matters such as the quality of graduates, the broadening achieved, the success rates of the programme, and the ambitions of the programme or track, the assessment will verify whether such matters can reasonably be expected to have been realised within six years. Ergo, such matters will be assessed on an *ex ante* basis.

The Minister's approval is granted on the basis of an assessment of the proposal submitted by an institution and is valid for an indefinite period of time. A practice-based assessment involves a one-off verification by NVAO of whether the ambitions that constituted the main basis for the approval have been realised. In principle, such a practice-based assessment by NVAO must be conducted within six years after approval was granted.

The practice-based assessment covers all the criteria, including the realisation of matters that have been assessed on an ex ante basis in the initial assessment: the quality of the graduates, the broadening achieved, the success rates, and the ambitions of the programme or track. The timeframe for the practice-based assessment is, in principle, aligned with the duration of the accreditation period, i.e., six years.

The practice-based assessment may be conducted at an earlier date if the institution is able to demonstrate that the intended ambitions for the programme or track are being realised ahead of schedule. The Minister may decide to have the practice-based assessment conducted earlier, conducted later (provided it is scheduled within the six-year term), or postponed. NVAO advises on this matter on the basis of its assessment of an application for the distinctive feature.

The distinctive feature is re-granted upon each re-accreditation, upon the request of the institution. At such time, a panel will assess whether the programme or track still meets the conditions for granting the distinctive feature. All the criteria will be assessed. If the assessment regarding the extension of the distinctive feature is conducted prior to the practice-based assessment, the achieved learning outcomes and the success rates will be assessed ex ante. If extension of the distinctive feature is assessed after the practice-based assessment, the actual results achieved with respect to these aspects will be taken into consideration.

The procedures for submission and the fees are specified on the NVAO website (www.nvaio.net).

2.2 Self-evaluation and appendices

The institution provides a self-evaluation to demonstrate that the programme concerned meets the criteria pertaining to the distinctive feature of "Small-scale and intensive education" as referred to in this specification. If the application is submitted concurrently with the application for accreditation or initial accreditation, the specification regarding the distinctive feature may be incorporated into the self-evaluation required for such an application. The institution may come to an agreement with the panel regarding another format or scope for the self-evaluation report. In addition to a self-evaluation, existing evaluative documents pertaining to the programmes may also be used. The criteria must be reflected in the self-evaluation in a reducible manner, e.g., by means of explanatory notes.

If the application is submitted separately from an application for accreditation or initial accreditation, the institution must provide a separate self-evaluation outlining the criteria referred to in paragraph 1.1.

The point of departure is for the programme to submit the documents and information that the panel requires for the performance of its assessment duties. The panel will exercise reticence, and refrain from requesting information other than is already available with the programme.

2.3 Panel composition

If an institution chooses to have the assessment conducted at a time that does not coincide with the assessment conducted in the context of an accreditation or initial accreditation procedure, NVAO will compose a panel of experts to carry out the assessment. This panel will be composed of experts with experience in earlier assessments relating to this distinctive feature or who have gained expertise in this area in other ways. If the assessment so requires, an expert from the relevant domain may be included in the panel.

In all other cases, at least one panel member must command specific expertise with respect to small-scale and intensive education; it is up to the institution to submit a proposal to this effect. The specific expertise of the panel member concerned must have been gained by way of an NVAO training or through experience with the assessment of an application for this distinctive feature in the recent past (less than two years ago).

2.4 Site visit

The assessment of an application for the distinctive feature of “Small-scale and intensive education” always involves a site visit. The programme submits a proposal for the organisation of the site visit. The panel will honour this proposal wherever possible and may request amendments in the purview of forming a reliable judgement. However, the panel will exercise reticence in this respect.

In the event that the assessment of the distinctive feature of “Small-scale and intensive education” is combined with an accreditation assessment, the former will observe the stipulations regarding the organisation of the site visit as set down in the standard framework. This means that a distinction must be made between interviews focusing on accountability and interviews focusing on development.

2.5 Reporting

The assessment of an application for the distinctive feature of “Small-scale and intensive education” as an element of an accreditation or initial accreditation assessment will entail a separate chapter in the assessment report, encompassing the scores awarded for each applicable criterion, the findings and considerations of the panel, and a substantiated final conclusion. The findings regarding an isolated initial assessment must be set down in a separate document. Such a report must also encompass a summary totalling some 500 words that is suitable for a wide range of readers.

2.6 Validity

The validity of the distinctive feature of “Small-scale and intensive education” is linked to the validity of the accreditation period of the programme concerned.

NVAO

The carefully developed and independent assessments of the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands & Flanders (NVAO) strengthen the internal quality culture of higher education institutions. The assessments conducted by NVAO constitute the basis for recognition of higher education programmes and the conferral of worthy degrees. NVAO is a bi-national organisation and engages in international collaboration.

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NVAO

Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders

Parkstraat 28/2514 JK The Hague

Postbox 85498/2508 CD The Hague

The Netherlands

T +31 70 312 23 00

E info@nvaio.net

www.nvaio.net