



NVAO ACTIVITY REPORT 2020

17 MAY 2021



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Preface

The year 2020 was an unusual one for NVAO. The COVID-19 pandemic, its repercussions on the primary processes, the changes within the Board, and the debates on the future developments of the system and of the organisation itself have had a major impact on the activities this past year. In March, all the assessment procedures were put on hold as the corona virus struck and the Belgian, Flemish, and Dutch governments enforced restrictive measures. In close consultation with the government authorities, with the umbrella organisations of universities and university colleges, and with the student organisations, measures were quickly implemented in both regions in order to continue the assessment of the quality of higher education, online or in hybrid form as needed. Over the past year, the higher education institutions in both regions have expended considerable efforts, on the one hand, to digitise their education and on the other, to allow the accreditation of programmes to continue. This merits great appreciation.

The figures for 2020 do not yet warrant conclusions regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the accreditation system. Across the board, the decisions were based on site visits conducted prior to the corona issue, which precluded any pertinent mention in the reports. NVAO has taken the initiative of reviewing the effects of COVID-19 on higher education and the accreditation system in 2021, through a joint study with the Education Inspectorate.

This past year, Flanders saw its new quality assurance system gain cruising speed with the first tailored assessments of universities and university colleges. Despite the extraordinary challenges that this year entailed, the COVID pandemic has afforded NVAO Flanders the opportunity to reflect, in concert with other European accreditation organisations, on ways to future-proof their procedures. In addition, NVAO Flanders was once more recruited by the Luxembourg government to assess LUNEX University and the University of Luxembourg.

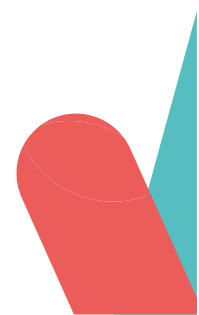
Online visitations enabled the Netherlands to round off a considerable number of applications in 2020. The outcomes of the assessments conducted over the past year hardly deviate from the long-term average over the past eight years: the positive quality level of higher education turns out to be stable. By the end of 2020, NVAO Netherlands evaluated the ex-ante assessment procedure within the framework of the Quality Agreements. In early 2021, the results of the “Quality agreements ex-ante phase process evaluation” were presented to the Minister of Education, Culture and Science, along with the national picture of the results of the ex-ante agreements. In 2020, NVAO intensively discussed the plans to further the higher education accreditation system towards institutional accreditation. In early 2021, NVAO informed the Minister of its views.

At the international level, 2020 saw attention being focused on the international projects pertaining to international quality assurance, specifically the EUnIQ project, whilst the Netherlands was actively involved in the development of several European Universities. In the second half of 2020, finally, the debate on the strategic developments up to 2025 was influenced by the desire of the Flemish and Dutch governments to adapt the NVAO organisational structure, after nearly two decades, in order to enable a high-quality, efficient, and future-oriented organisation. The future organisation model will be elaborated in more detail in 2021 and must feature greater organisational independence for both Flanders and the Netherlands, without compromising the added value for collaboration.

In 2020, Flemish Board members Dirk Broos and Rudi D'Hauwers took leave of NVAO. The Committee of Ministers appointed Prof. Dr Wouter Duyck as their successor.

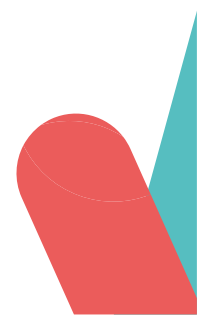
This report gives you a faithful picture of the activities conducted by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) over the past year.

M.A. van Straalen, Interim Chair
Prof. Dr Wouter Duyck, Vice Chair



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Flanders

In 2020, the higher education sector (once more) demonstrated its resilience. COVID-19 confronted students, staff, and support services with an unprecedented change-over: in no time, they had to switch from physical lecture halls to virtual classes and remote exams. A transformation forced by circumstances, rather than a gradual development. And despite its growing pains, this radical turnaround will no doubt remain directive.

This period has also afforded NVAO Flanders the opportunity to reflect, in concert with other European accreditation organisations, on ways to future-proof our procedures, tying in with the challenges that we are facing. And, when the pandemic is over and the restrictive measures are lifted, NVAO Flanders will continue to work on this.

Assessment activities in Flanders

Since the introduction of the institutional reviews and the new Flemish quality assurance system, a comparison of the number of applications and decisions taken over time no longer holds good, as the responsibility for assuring the quality of accredited programmes is now vested with the Flemish university colleges and universities themselves. To this end, they are calling on a mixture of internal and external experts, and they are required to publish information on the quality of such programmes on their own websites. Every six years, NVAO conducts an institutional review to assess how an institution is achieving all this. A pass releases the institution from the obligation of having each individual programme assessed by NVAO. Only new programmes and initial accreditations require assessment by an external NVAO panel. All the recognised higher education institutions in Flanders give account of the quality of their programmes through an external quality assessment agency registered on the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). In practice, they predominantly tend to turn to NVAO.

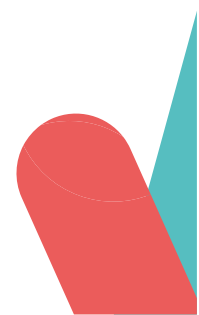
In 2020, NVAO Flanders received 61 applications for the assessment of new or existing programmes. In addition, 15 applications submitted in 2019 were carried over to 2020. Out of the 61 new applications received in 2020, 31 will continue to be processed in 2021. The year 2020 was a remarkable one in many respects. Unlike under the previous quality assurance system, the organisation of assessments is now in the hands of NVAO Flanders, and as a result of the pandemic, scheduling was not always a matter of course.

In 2020, the accreditation of 103 programmes was extended based on a positive institutional review. In addition, 24 new programmes were recognised, the majority of which involved first degree programmes, whilst 10 existing Flemish higher education programmes were positively assessed. Four applications were withdrawn before a formal decision was taken.

First tailored assessments

Under the Flemish quality assurance system, new and existing programmes provided by universities and university colleges that still require initial accreditation are still subjected to critical albeit tailored assessment by NVAO. The strict assessment frameworks, detailed checklists, and style of interview have been replaced by the NVAO Evaluating Approach, open frameworks, and ditto exchanges of views.

The year 2020 saw the introduction of a tailored approach to the assessment of both new and existing programmes. In 2020, the Flanders department received 3 such applications for new programmes and 12 applications for the assessment of existing programmes. The first “new style” reports will follow during the course of 2021.



Start of first system-wide analysis: “Co-creation with the professional field”

Also new in the Flemish quality assurance system are system-wide analyses. They provide insight into recent developments in issues relating to educational policy and programme quality. NVAO compiles the results into an overview report that is publicly shared. The main goal is the explicit communication of good practices in Flemish higher education and learning from one another. In 2020-2021, NVAO Flanders organised the first system-wide analysis, focused on the topic of “Co-creation with the professional field”

In 2020, institutions and programmes commanding expertise on this topic were invited to participate and actively contribute to the start-up of this very first system-wide analysis.

COVID-19 pushing online education to the forefront

COVID-19 also impacted the NVAO activities in Flanders. Assessment activities requiring site visits were suspended for a few months. Ever since the summer, fluctuating infection rates have forced the institutions, panels, and NVAO into flexibility. In consultation with the Cabinet and the institutions, NVAO conducted pilot procedures to test whether the dialogue between the assessment panel and the programme to be assessed could be conducted online.

Instruments now expanded with online or hybrid assessment

These pilots have produced positive results: online interviews constitute a sufficiently supplementary instrument. However, they cannot entirely replace the site visits. In order to embed the possibilities offered by online interviews in the regulations, the assessment frameworks were amended accordingly.



“We have turned necessity into a virtue and are now adding online interviews to our toolkit as a supplementary instrument. We are not only adapting the assessment frameworks to the current circumstances: we are essentially future proofing them. We are focusing on the end rather than the means, viz., setting up a dialogue between the panel and the institution. They are now at liberty to choose, in mutual consultation, the most appropriate formula.”

Axel Aerden, Director, NVAO Flanders

The adapted frameworks have been submitted to the Flemish Interuniversity Council VLIR and to the Council of Flemish University Colleges VLHORA. In November 2020, they were approved by the Flemish government.

Accelerated realisation of online training platform for panel members

The development of a new online training platform for panel members had already been initiated before the pandemic. Such a platform enables external experts to choose where and when to follow the various training modules. In response to COVID-19, NVAO Flanders has expedited the creation of this online module. Institutions, experienced panel members, and NVAO staff were involved in the process, both prior to the development and during the pilot phase.

In addition to the online modules, most assessment procedures still involve “physical” training sessions, focusing mainly on role plays and practicing the NVAO Evaluating Approach.

Overview of decisions

In addition to the 103 accreditations based on institutional reviews, 24 new programmes were recognised in 2020 and 10 existing Flemish higher education programmes were accredited.

Table 1: Overview of applications submitted and decisions taken in Flanders in 2020¹

	Applications	Decisions
Initial accreditations	30	24
Accreditation of existing programmes	31	10
Extension of accreditation based on positive institutional review	-	103
Total		137

Itemisation

Initial accreditation		
First degree programmes	21	23
Bachelor's programmes (professional orientation)	1	0
Bachelor's programmes (academic orientation)	1	0
Master's programmes (academic orientation) (excluding the Master's in Education programmes)	4	1
Master's in Education programmes	2	0
Advanced bachelor's programmes	1	0
Advanced master's programmes	0	0
Accreditation of existing programmes		
First degree programmes	7	0
Bachelor's programmes (professional orientation)	6	4
Bachelor's programmes (academic orientation)	5	4
Master's programmes (academic orientation)	11	2
Advanced bachelor's programmes	1	0
Advanced master's programmes	1	0
Extension of accreditation based on positive institutional review		
Bachelor's programmes (professional orientation)	-	42
Bachelor's programmes (academic orientation)	-	13
Master's programmes (academic orientation)	-	25
Advanced bachelor's programmes	-	5
Advanced master's programmes	-	18

Subject-specific learning outcomes

The subject-specific learning outcomes in Flanders describe the educational qualification and thus substantiate a collective set of competences that all the students in the whole of Flanders are expected to acquire within a particular programme. NVAO validates the subject-specific learning outcomes for the master's, bachelor's, and first-degree programmes in Flanders after the outcomes have been endorsed by the Flemish Council of Universities and University Colleges (VLUHR – for bachelor's and master's programmes), or by the Council of Flemish university colleges (VLHORA – for graduates). This applies to both new programmes upon applying for initial accreditation and to the updating of already existing subject-specific learning outcomes. In 2020, NVAO Flanders validated 12 subject-specific learning outcomes.

Table 2: Overview of subject-specific learning outcomes validated in Flanders

2020

¹ These figures reflect the numbers of applications and decisions effectively registered in 2020. In some cases, a decision on an application submitted in 2020 may not be taken until 2021 (or, a decision taken in 2020 will be based on an application submitted in 2019). Applications that have ultimately been withdrawn have been assessed by a panel but will not result in an official decision by NVAO.

Graduates	0
Bachelor's programmes (professional orientation)	0
Bachelor's programmes (academic orientation)	1
Master's programmes	2
Advanced bachelor's programmes	5
Advanced master's programmes	4
Total	12

The subject-specific learning outcomes are ranked at the appropriate level in the Flemish qualification structure and published in the qualifications database of the Agency for Higher Education, Adult Education, Qualifications, and Study Allowances (AHOVOKS).

Other activities

SAMENaries

SAMENaries are interactive sessions in which NVAO explores the various components of the Flemish quality assurance system, in concert with those responsible for quality assurance in Flanders. These sessions afford the institutions involved the opportunity to share their experience with one another and with NVAO.

In 2020, the Flanders department organised three SAMENaries:

- Student SAMENarie - 18 February 2020 - Odisee University College
- "Customisation" SAMENarie - 3 March 2020 - Vrije Universiteit Brussel
- "System-wide Analyses" SAMENarie - 4 May 2020 (online)

Representatives of all the Flemish universities and university colleges, of the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR), of the Council of Flemish university colleges (VLHORA), and of the National Union of Students in Flanders (VVS) participated in the SAMENaries.

Flemish Education Inspectorate and NVAO join forces for the first time

In Flanders, 20 secondary schools and 10 university colleges are collaborating in the provision of the Nursing Associate Degree programme to some 7,150 young people and adults. Successful completion of their studies earns them the Nursing Graduate certificate, which enables them to pursue the nursing profession.

As the programmes rank as higher education but are provided in a school for fulltime secondary education, their quality assessment is the joint responsibility of the Flemish Education Inspectorate and NVAO Flanders.

To this end, in 2020 the Education Inspectorate and NVAO Flanders embarked on the development of a tailored, cross-level assessment framework, in collaboration with the educational institutions involved. Before being implemented, the assessment framework must be approved by the Flemish government. The entire process must be completed by the spring of 2021, in order for the first assessments to start in the 2021-2022 school year.

Collaboration agreement between AACSB and NVAO

In Flanders, recognised higher education institutions can give account of the quality of their programmes through another quality assurance agency. If this agency is not registered on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), it may enter into a collaboration agreement with NVAO in which it guarantees that its external assessments in Flanders will be conducted in accordance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

NVAO offers the option of entering into a collaboration agreement because the international quality assurance organisations cannot all be expected to adapt their standard methodologies, most of which bear global application, to an exclusively European context.

NVAO Flanders and AACSB International have signed a renewed collaboration agreement for the duration of the current quality assurance system in Flanders (up to 2025). This guarantees that AACSB will carry out all its external assessments in Flanders in accordance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. AACSB assesses and accredits business schools and business programmes all over the world. Only if the relevant external assessments are conducted in accordance with this agreement, will the ensuing assessment reports be considered admissible for submitting an application for accreditation by NVAO.

Flemish Parliament hearing regarding teacher training programmes (5 March 2020)

At a hearing in the Flemish Parliament concerning the teacher training programmes, NVAO shared its insights on the quality of the Flemish teacher training programmes, based on, inter alia, the 101 recent assessments of teaching programmes.

In addition, NVAO made a case for, inter alia, an educational benchmark on the level of ambition of the Flemish subject-specific learning outcomes compared to the attainment targets set by teacher training programmes in other countries.

Professionalisation through exchange with European quality assurance organisations

NVAO Flanders is looking across the borders of Flemish and Dutch higher education. We take inspiration from good practices of other European quality assurance organisations, regarding ways to further expand various components of the new system and regarding ways to support institutions and programmes in their further development through our assessment activities.

Four exchanges between Flemish and foreign colleagues had been scheduled for 2020, supported by the Bologna Peer Support Group for Quality Assurance. As a result of COVID-19, these were limited to a mutual exchange with UKÄ, the Swedish higher education authority.

Swedish exploration of Flanders: Välkommen!



“Our national and statutory frameworks differ, but we have the ESG as our common basis and our procedures are similar. It is, therefore, refreshing to reflect on the daily practice of assessment procedures and to exchange ideas on, e.g. how we conduct interviews, on how we set up site visits, on the training of panel members, and on writing reports,”

Charlotte Elam, UKÄ

NVAO and UKÄ share a rich history of quality assurance. Although the field of activity of UKÄ, the Swedish higher education authority, is wider in scope than that of NVAO, many similarities can be observed in the quality assurance systems of Sweden and Flanders. The Swedish system features similar components, such as institutional reviews in combination with programme assessments and theme-based analyses. The ties were strengthened once more in 2020 through a mutual exchange between UKÄ and the Flemish department of NVAO.

The Netherlands

Over the past year, assessment of the quality of Dutch higher education could continue somewhat as usual, despite the physical restrictions ensuing from the measures to combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus (corona). As NVAO Netherlands was fully committed to options for digital completion of the procedures, once more a considerable number of applications for accreditation of existing and new higher education programmes could be processed.

The quality level of higher education also remained positive without abatement. With respect to existing programmes, the panels confirmed that picture just before the corona crisis set in. The quality of new programmes remained constant over the past year as well; vis-à-vis the previous years, little changed in 2020 in terms of the percentage of conditional accreditations and withdrawn applications. By the end of the year, however, many universities availed themselves of the governmental “general pardon” to postpone the submission of their applications by a year.

In 2020, NVAO Netherlands processed, in close collaboration with the universities, a total of 629 regular accreditations of existing and new programmes and institutional audits. Wherever possible, the procedures were completed online. The vast majority of the processed applications were received in November 2019 and May 2020, on the basis of assessments conducted prior to the corona crisis. By the end of 2020, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science had set up an arrangement enabling higher education institutions to postpone the submission of their accreditation applications to November the following year. Upon coordination with the Ministry, the umbrella organisations of the universities, and student unions, a special scheme was developed for the assessment of new programmes, enabling online site visits from summer 2020 onwards. After the summer, the site visits within the framework of the Learning Outcomes Learning Outcomes Experiment could also continue online.

Total number of decisions

Table 3: Total number of decisions in the Netherlands (including assessment of satisfaction of conditions / after improvement)

	2019	2020
Accreditation of existing programmes	682	537
Accreditation of new programmes	75	80
Institutional audits	13	12
Total	770	629
Ex ante assessment of quality agreements	34	30

Existing programmes

Stable quality level

In 2020, the outcomes of the assessments hardly differ from the long-term average over the past eight years: the positive quality level of higher education turns out to be stable. Conditions are imposed on a small number of programmes: over the past eight years, an average of 5 per cent of the existing programmes. The results over 2020 underscore that picture: only 25 of the total of 537 existing programmes assessed were required to demonstrate their satisfaction of the conditions imposed earlier.

Table 4: Accreditation of existing programmes in the Netherlands (excluding assessments following improvement period / of satisfaction of conditions)

	2019	2020	2020%	Long-term 2012-2020	
Academic higher education					
Positive	404	300	99%	2001	95%
Application withdrawn	1	-	0%	8	0%
Improvement period	10	3	1%	100	5%
Academic higher education overall	415	303		2109	
Professional higher education					
Positive	211	180	95%	1653	95%
Application withdrawn	-	-	0%	9	1%
Improvement period	12	9	5%	83	5%
Negative		1		1	
Professional higher education overall	233	223		1746	
Associate Degrees					
Positive	35	17	89%	77	97%
Application withdrawn	-	1	5%	1	1%
Improvement period	-	1	5%	1	1%
Associate Degrees overall	35	19		79	

Itemisation

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Research master's programmes	1	6	12	73	12	14	14	4	1
Assessment of improvement	-	-	16	13	42	21	2	10	25

New programmes

Online site visits enabled procedures to continue

In 2020, 80 applications concerning new programmes were processed, versus 75 in 2019. Online site visits via the "(temporary) initial accreditation scheme" enabled the procedures to continue. With respect to 12 programmes, the assessment involved conditions imposed earlier. An average of 60 per cent of the new programmes received a positive conclusion. Conditions were imposed for 20 per cent of the new programmes and the remaining 20 per cent have withdrawn their applications.

Follow-up assessment after three years

New programmes are subjected to a follow-up assessment after three years if the institution has failed its institutional audit, and the level of its learning assessment as well as the available final projects require further examination. The past year saw 14 such assessments.

Table 5: Accreditation of new programmes in the Netherlands (excluding assessments following improvement period / of satisfaction of conditions)

	2019	2020	2020%	Long-term 2012-2019	
Academic higher education					
Positive	16	8	57%	108	64%
Application withdrawn	5	-	0%	22	13%
Conditions	2	5	36%	38	22%
Other	-	1		1	

<i>Academic higher education overall</i>	23	14		169	
Professional higher education					
Positive	14	11	46%	129	51%
Application withdrawn	4	8	33%	69	27%
Negative	-	-	0%	2	1%
Conditions	3	5	21%	52	21%
<i>Professional higher education overall</i>	21	24		252	
Associate Degrees					
Positive	14	23	77%	85	71%
Application withdrawn	-	4	13%	9	8%
Conditions	3	3	10%	25	21%
<i>Associate Degrees overall</i>	17	30		119	

Itemisation

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Initial accreditation of Associate Degree programmes ²	-	-	1	-	25	18	42	-	-
Initial accreditation, exit level after 3 years	-	-	-	-	-	7	15	11	14
Associate Degrees	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	23	24
Master's in Education programmes					2	5	-	-	0
Assessment of satisfaction of conditions	-	-	2	6	17	19	21	13	12

Institutional audits

In 2020, NVAO Netherlands processed 12 institutional audit applications from universities. For 10 institutions, the audit resulted in a positive decision, two of which were conditional.

Quality Agreements virtually finalised

In 2018, the Minister of Education, Culture and Science concluded an agreement with the education sector regarding the substantiation of the Higher Education Quality Agreements 2019-2024. NVAO Netherlands was requested to conduct an independent assessment of the agreements. To this end, the "Protocol for Assessment of the Quality Agreements 2019-2024" was developed, which addresses three review stages, viz.:

1) in 2019, assessment of the plans submitted by the institutions regarding the allocation of the study advance resources; 2) in 2022, assessment of the realisation of the plans; and 3) from 2023 on, evaluation of the realisation of the plans.

The assessments of the ex-ante stage were included in the institutional audits as a separate trail, conducted as a trail following the institutional audits (in the event that the institutional audit had already been completed), or carried out as an independent assessment. The assessments were conducted by means of peer review. A total of some 100 panel members visited 54 publicly funded institutions.

In 2020, NVAO Netherlands submitted a total of 30 recommendations to the Minister (25 positive and 5 negative ones), including 13 re-assessments which all warranted a positive conclusion. Approximately one third of the institutions (19) failed to receive a positive decision from the Minister upon their first application. This means that in 2020 and 2021, NVAO will be conducting improvement assessments of these institutions. On account of the COVID-19 issue, NVAO has decided to conduct the assessment on the basis of the application dossier. In

² Up to 2018; subsequently, the Associate Degrees received the programme status.

addition, the end of 2020 saw the start of the preparations and the implementation for the evaluation of the procedure. By early 2021, NVAO Netherlands will present the "Process Evaluation of the Quality Agreements Ex Ante Phase" to the Minister, along with a national picture of the results of the ex-ante agreements.

Table 6: Ex ante assessment of Quality Agreements

	2019	2020
Positive recommendation	23	25
Negative recommendation	11	5
Total	34	30

Other assessments

Prospective training schools

At the request of the Minister of Education, Culture and Science, NVAO Netherlands assessed seven prospective training schools in the past year. Overall, five positive and two negative recommendations were submitted to the Minister.

Learning Outcomes Experiment

Under the Learning Outcomes Experiment, higher education programmes are free to structure their teaching activities in a flexible manner, geared to the needs of their students. During the Experiment, programmes are assessed once on the basis of a protocol drawn up by NVAO. A total of 21 universities of applied sciences (publicly funded and privately funded) are participating in the Experiment, comprising 370 part-time and work-based learning modes of study.

Over the past year, NVAO Netherlands processed 96 Experiment applications, 10 of which in combination with a regular application for accreditation. After the summer, the Experiment site visits were also conducted online. The Experiment has sparked a great deal of energy and enthusiasm within the education sector: this different approach is almost certain to gain permanence. The teaching-learning situation is changing; lectures and classes are making way for learning meetings and learning teams, whilst students are learning on the job. Personal learning routes are gradually picking up steam. The education world is embracing the prospects of working on the basis of learning outcomes, also because the flexibilisation of education is gaining ground. Within professional higher education, the part-time/work-based learning concept is no longer regarded as a "surrogate" of the full-time mode of study.

In the autumn of 2020, NVAO Netherlands submitted a positive recommendation to the Minister of Education, Culture and Science regarding the experience gained with the Experiment. Following approval of new legislation by the House of Representatives, the Experiment could be enacted by 2022.

Recognised private institutions

Over the past year, NVAO Netherlands has processed five applications from new institutions wishing to be recognised as a "legal entity providing higher education". Such applications are subjected to an aggravated initial accreditation procedure. Two applications were approved. Developing education that meets the quality criteria for government recognition remains difficult: over the past eight years, only one-quarter of the applications was approved (5).

Aruba, Curaçao, and Saba

In 2020, NVAO Netherlands provided 5 conclusions involving Aruba, Curaçao and Saba. The Minister of Education, Culture and Science has requested NVAO for its judgment regarding the quality of programmes presented to NVAO by public higher education institutions from the Caribbean Netherlands, Aruba, or Curaçao. This does not involve an accreditation or initial

accreditation procedure in the sense of the Higher Education and Research Act (WHW). This Act applies to the Kingdom of the Netherlands, including the Caribbean Netherlands (BES islands).

Other assessments	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Prospective training schools	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	16	7
Learning Outcomes Experiment	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	10	96
TNE (Transnational Education) recommendations	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	2
European Approach Applications	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	2	3
Recognised Private Institutions (aggravated initial accreditations)	-	-	1	5	1	3	5	1	5
Judgments involving Aruba, Curaçao, Saba	15	2	2	3	4	3	9	3	5

Other activities

Development of quality assurance system

In 2020, NVAO Netherlands organised several meetings with Dutch and Flemish staff and the Board of NVAO regarding the development of the Dutch quality assurance system in 2023 and beyond. During an online meeting in May, potential next steps and the development towards institutional accreditation were discussed with the Minister of Education, Culture and Science in person. During a webinar “Quality and quality culture in times of change” in June, Board Member Anneke Luijten-Lub engaged the members of the Professional Higher Education platform of the Netherlands Quality Management Network (NNK) in a dialogue on institutional accreditation. In early 2021, NVAO Netherlands informed the Minister in writing of its findings with respect to the further development of the higher education accreditation system towards institutional accreditation, by reinforcing the ownership of the universities in the system.



“By introducing institutional accreditation – which will require a tailored approach, depending on the nature and the size of the institution – for both publicly funded and private universities, we expect to enhance the institutions’ involvement in the quality assurance system, which will boost their quality culture. This is expected to benefit the quality of education. When the institutions, together with their staff and students, assume greater responsibility for the quality control of their programmes, the assurance of the quality of education will be vested with those who are actually pursuing such quality. Increased responsibility for educational quality will enable institutions to respond more rapidly and more directly to such external challenges as digitalisation, differentiation, and flexibilisation of curricula.”

Dr A.H. Flierman, Chairman, NVAO

Transparent advisory reports on initial accreditation

In the *Back to Basics. The Advisory Report* project, the advisory reports on initial accreditations were evaluated on the basis of national and international criteria and examples of transparent and effective reporting. New points of departure were formulated, that have resulted in a new, clear format. With effect from 2020, NVAO Netherlands has now been publishing two advisory reports for each initial accreditation procedure: a concise report for a wide readership with an English summary and information on the subsequent procedure, including the follow-up; and in addition, a full report for the institution/programme and interested parties, reflecting the

findings and considerations. Both advisory reports comprise recommendations and state strengths.

Internal and external appeals

In 2020, NVAO Netherlands processed three appeals against accreditation decisions. Two of the three cases were still in the hands of the appeals advisory committee by the end of December 2020. The third appeal was lodged with a request to consent to direct external appeal. NVAO consented to direct external appeal. By the end of December 2020, a verdict on this appeal by the Administrative Jurisdiction Department of the Council of State was still forthcoming.

GDPR

In 2020, NVAO Netherlands received one personal data request. This has led to a decision to provide the data.

Renewed collaboration agreement with AACSB

As NVAO Flanders – following NVAO Netherlands – also wished to enter into a collaboration agreement with AACSB International, NVAO renewed its existing agreement in 2020. This means that recognised higher education institutions in the Netherlands and in Flanders can have their programmes assessed concurrently as required by the international quality assurance organisation, in accordance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

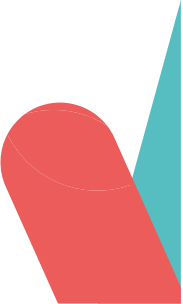
Furthermore, NVAO Netherlands has entered into collaboration agreements with the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes (EADI); the European Association for Public Administration Accreditation (EAPAA); the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD); and the International Centre of Excellence in Tourism and Hospitality Education (THE-ICE). This enables Dutch higher education institutions to combine their national and international assessment and accreditation processes, thus easing their administrative burden.

Knowledge exchange

Despite the coronavirus restrictions, NVAO Netherlands was still able to pay considerable attention to knowledge exchange in 2020, as the meetings were held online. Members of the Board and the Management Team attended sessions or gave presentations at a meeting of the Malayan Agency on online assessment and accreditation; the Member Status Cluster Meeting on European Blockchain Partnership and Governance; the European Universities consortium Charm EU; the ENQA Leadership programme; and the QAA International Platform Forum webinar.

Policy staff also provided digital presentations or attended online meetings: the Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG) Thematic Peer Group A, presentation during *Current and Future Trends - Linking Qualifications Frameworks with Quality Assurance* seminar; 2020 Conference of the European University Association EUA; a training programme for students from Hungary and Slovakia aimed at their participation in national and international panels of the European Students Union ESU (February); presentation of a paper entitled *The Market of International MD Students* during the 12th INQAAHE Forum on *Quality Competences and Learning Outcomes: how to be fit for Generation Z employability* (April); the webinar on *Perspectives: effects of the 2020 pandemic on the accreditation and practice of medical education* of the World Federation for Medical Education WFME (June); a webinar presentation on *Accreditation and Quality Assurance in the European Region* for the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations IFMSA; the WFME & NVAO meeting of the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre FINEEC; an online meeting of the National Committee on Foreign Medical Education and Accreditation, US Department of Education NCFMEA (September); ENQA review panel membership with the Swiss Agency of Accreditation and Quality Assurance AAQ (November); ENQA panel

membership for the progress visit of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency SQAA; follow-up basic training, 20 students from a range of European countries aimed at their participation in national and international panels of the European Students Union ESU (December).



International activities

Board positions

In 2020, NVAO Chair Dr A.H. Anne Flierman continued his activities as a member (Treasurer) of the Board of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). His term of office will end in 2021 upon his resignation as NVAO Chair. The ENQA board members are elected for a three-year term on the recommendation of the associated quality assurance organisations. In June 2020, the Director of NVAO Netherlands Mr L. Kroes was appointed as member of the Board (Treasurer) of the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA). The ECA board members are elected for a two-year term on the recommendation of the sitting members.

Assessment of higher education in Luxembourg

In early 2020, NVAO Flanders assessed the Luxembourg LUNEX University and four of its programmes. The assessment was conducted by an independent NVAO panel of experts in the fields of education, quality assurance, and the relevant professional sectors, on the basis of a framework that reflects both the statutory criteria in place in Luxembourg and the Flemish standards for the assessment of institutions and programmes. Upon completion of the procedure, the assessment report was forwarded to the Luxembourg Ministry of Higher Education and Research to underpin its accreditation decision.

This is not the first time that Luxembourg has recruited NVAO to assess the quality of its higher education. As the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg does not have an accreditation organisation of its own, it calls on organisations abroad for an independent assessment of its higher education. In 2020, NVAO Flanders was also recruited to assess the University of Luxembourg. This time, 35 panel members were trained and involved. The final report and its presentation to the Luxembourg Ministry and Parliament are scheduled for the spring of 2021.



“Our assessment activities in Luxembourg chime with our international strategy to enhance higher education and collaboration in the field of quality assurance in the Benelux countries. They are supported by our earlier experience in Luxembourg and in the Benelux as a whole.”

Axel Aerden, Director, NVAO Flanders

Organisation of Quality Audit Network

Under normal conditions, NVAO Flanders would have welcomed the members of the Quality Audit Network (QAN) in Brussels, in concert with AEQES, the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education of the French Community of Belgium. However, this year, the event was organised online on 15 and 16 June 2020. The QAN network was founded 12 years ago as an informal network of quality assurance organisations tasked with some form of audit, review, or evaluation of higher education at the institutional level. The agenda featured sessions on digitalisation of quality assurance procedures and online site visits; on the selection and training of peers; and on writing reports. In several sessions, the participating members shared the most recent updates of their agencies. For NVAO, the emphasis was on the new Flemish quality assurance system and the evolution towards hybrid assessment procedures (offline/online) in Flanders.

European projects

DEQAR CONNECT

In 2018-2019, NVAO Flanders participated in the first DEQAR project, along with 16 other quality assurance organisations and the main European stakeholders' organisations. Participation in this project entails that the Flemish decisions and the underlying assessment reports will automatically be published in DEQAR, the European "Database of External Quality Assurance Results". This will provide users with easy access to reports and decisions on higher education institutions and programmes, which will foster mobility and support the recognition of degrees. Because of its experience, in 2020 NVAO Flanders was asked to join the follow-up project, "DEQAR CONNECT", as a mentor to support partners. DEQAR CONNECT intends to expand the DEQAR database with countries from the European higher education area that are currently under-represented in the DEQAR database. Meanwhile, NVAO Flanders has contributed more than 2100 of its accreditation reports and decisions to DEQAR.

EUniQ

NVAO Flanders is coordinating the European EUniQ project that is aimed at developing a "European Approach for Comprehensive Quality Assurance of (European) University Networks". In 2020, the framework was developed and field-tested during pilot assessments of four alliances.

European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

The European Approach as internationally approved by the Education Ministries involves the assessment of international joint programmes requiring, in principle, a single assessment which is adopted and recognised by other countries without any additional conditions. NVAO Netherlands processed three applications within this context over the past year.

Transnational Education

Transnational Education (TNE) involves collaboration between higher education institutions from various countries, aimed at producing a joint degree. NVAO Netherlands provided two pertinent recommendations over the past year.

Other international activities

Quality assurance networks

The worldwide restrictive measures to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus prevented NVAO staff from participating in the activities of (international) quality assurance networks in the usual manner. Wherever possible, staff participated in online meetings.

Working visits

In 2020, NVAO did not receive any delegations from abroad due to the COVID-19 containment measures.

Presentations

Assemblies and meetings were mainly held in digital format in 2020. NVAO Netherlands Board members and policy staff attended or gave presentations at several national and international online assemblies and meetings.

Collaboration with stakeholders

NVAO periodically consults with the Flemish and Dutch Ministers of Education and their respective administrations. In 2020, the NVAO Executive Board participated in three of the consultations held between the two Ministers (Committee of Ministers). Official consultations are also held with the Dutch and Flemish Ministries of Education.

Flanders

Within the Sounding Board consultative body, NVAO Flanders Department regularly confers with the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, the Cabinet of the Flemish Minister of Education, the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR), the Council of Flemish University Colleges (VLHORA), and the student organisation VVS (National Union of Students in Flanders) about the development of the Flemish quality assurance system and other issues.

NVAO Flanders is an observer in the Learning Outcomes Steering Committee of the Flemish Council of Universities and University Colleges (VLUHR). Furthermore, the Flanders Department collaborates with the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR); the Council of Flemish University Colleges (VLHORA); the Flemish National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC Flanders); the Flemish Agency for Higher Education, Adult Education, Qualifications and Study Allowances (AHOVOKS); and the Flemish Education Council (VLOR).

The Netherlands

NVAO Netherlands maintains contact at various levels with the Dutch umbrella organisations: the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU); the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (VH); the Platform of Recognised Private Training Institutions (NRTO); the Education Inspectorate; the Education Council; the Dutch organisation for internationalisation in education (Nuffic); the Information Centre for Degree Accreditation (IDW); the Dutch National Students Association (ISO); and the Dutch National Union of Students (LSVb). In the purview of periodic consultations with the various stakeholders, a stakeholders' consultative body has been set up.

NVAO Netherlands has been collaborating closely with the Committee for Effective Higher Education (CDHO) and the Education Inspectorate for quite some time (cf. the NVAO website, <https://www.nvao.net/nl/samenwerking-icn>). In 2020, the information provided by the three parties regarding procedures and questions was shared, in order to enable interested parties to quickly find the required information and to provide univocal answers to questions that are posed. To this end, a *governance visual* has been developed and the FAQs on the organisational websites have been mutually coordinated. Additional attention has been focused on the coordination between the CDHO Committee and NVAO as regards the macro-efficiency procedures (CDHO) and initial accreditations (NVAO). The websites of the two organisations feature the same information on timeframes, sequencing, required information, and decision-making. Furthermore, in 2020 CDHO and NVAO continued their efforts to optimise the sharing of one another's recommendations and decisions. NVAO Netherlands has engaged in active collaboration with the Education Inspectorate to explore what information can be shared back and forth, and what additional information could be useful for supporting analyses. The three organisations pursued coordination with the Ministry regarding bottlenecks in regulations and legislation that hamper the performance of their tasks. Marked steps have been taken in this respect. Furthermore, the three organisations expressly joined forces in debates on institutional accreditation and the use of risk models for the assessment of education. More specific information on the collaboration between CDHO and the Education Inspectorate can be found in their respective annual reports. The three parties engage in structural consultations regarding the collective performance of tasks and development issues, whilst each has its own regular bilateral consultations regarding current affairs.

NVAO Netherlands regularly confers with the quality assessment agencies, both bilaterally and collectively, to discuss the implementation of the quality assurance system, the developments, and the assessment procedures. For (independent) Panel Secretaries, NVAO organises meetings and training sessions to discuss developments and points for attention in the assessment procedure. In 2020, such training sessions were conducted online.

Once a year, an information meeting is held for quality assurance staff of the universities to discuss current issues. This past autumn, the meeting was postponed to early 2021, in order to ease the workload of university staff.



NVAO Organisation

Board

The Dutch and Flemish members of the Board of NVAO are experts in the fields of higher education, the professional practice of higher education, scientific or academic research, or quality assurance. The NVAO Board focuses on the strategic policy to be pursued by the organisation. It consists of a maximum of fifteen members, who are appointed for a four-year term by the Committee of Ministers (the Dutch and Flemish Ministers responsible for higher education). The Chair and a maximum of four other members of the Board constitute the NVAO Executive Board. The Board of NVAO has mandated the Executive Board – and, with respect to the Netherlands, also the Management Team – to decide on specific applications.

Composition of the Board of NVAO (with effect from 31 December 2020)

Dr A.H. (Anne) Flierman – Chair, the Netherlands; also Member of the Executive Board
Prof. Dr Wouter Duyck – Vice-Chair, Flanders, also Member of the Executive Board
Ludo Beheydt - Flanders
Julie Beyens - Flanders
Mia De Schamphelaere - Flanders
Prof. Dr J. (Jeroen) Huisman – International
M. (Mirjam) Koster-Wentink MA – the Netherlands
M. (Maaïke) Krom - the Netherlands
Dr A. (Anneke) Luijten-Lub - the Netherlands, also Member of the Executive Board
Bart Maes - Flanders
T.J.E. (Truus) Omta - the Netherlands
M.A. (Michaël) van Straalen – the Netherlands
Dr B.E. (Lietke) van Vucht Tijssen - the Netherlands

Composition of NVAO Executive Board (with effect from 31 December 2020)

Dr A.H. (Anne) Flierman - Chair, the Netherlands
Prof. Dr Wouter Duyck - Vice-Chair, Flanders
Dr A. (Anneke) Luijten-Lub - the Netherlands

Office

Relocation

At the end of February 2020, NVAO moved, along with the Committee for Effective Higher Education CDHO and the Committee for Macro Efficiency in Vocational Training CMMBO, to a floor in the Haagsche Hof office building, located across the street at 83 Parkstraat. Unfortunately, the staff were only able to enjoy their new workplace for two weeks. Since 16 March 2020, following the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis, the NVAO, CDHO, and CMMBO staff have been working from home and online as much as possible.

Filing and computerisation

By March 2020, the Filing Department had fully digitalised the records. The multi-year Digital Records project was essential to continue to meet the requirements stipulated by the Public Records Act and to simplify the application procedure. Within the IT department, the digital work processes have been optimised over the past year. Preparations have been made to switch to an up-to-date, internal workflow system. The NVAO systems automatically exchange Flemish data with the Flemish government (AHOVOKS). On behalf of the Central Register of Higher Education Programmes (CROHO), Dutch data is exchanged with the Dutch governmental implementation agency for the education sector in Groningen (DUO).

Communication

In terms of communication, the year 2020 was dominated by the measures enforced by the Belgian, Flemish, and Dutch governments to combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus and by the pertinent internal and external notification of the various target groups. Special information bulletins on the measures went out to all the department staff, as well as to the CHDO and CMMBO staff who are using the NVAO offices. In the building, signs were posted to encourage staff to follow the hygiene guidelines and observe the 1.5 m distance. Externally, the contacts of NVAO Flanders and NVAO Netherlands, and the staff of the Flemish and Dutch higher education institutions were informed of the measures taken by the two departments and of the options for organising online site visits and assessments. In all cases, the guidelines set down by the specific governments were observed.

This past year, the meetings and events of NVAO Flanders and NVAO Netherlands were either cancelled or substituted by online alternatives, due to the corona virus containment measures. The Meet & Greet in Antwerp for the Dutch and Flemish contacts, scheduled for the summer of 2020, could not take place either. The periodic meetings to assess the plans relating to the Quality Agreements were held online, as were the training sessions for the Dutch panel chairs and secretaries and for the Flemish panel members.

Through press releases, news flashes, and posts on social media, NVAO Flanders and NVAO Netherlands keep national and international target groups abreast of their activities in Flanders, the Netherlands, and at the international level. In 2020, several community-minded and accessible articles were published via the FOQUS digital magazine: on "A EUniQ partnership to kickstart a European QA framework for European Universities" (June); the NVAO Report on 2019 (July), and on "The Flemish QA System: Understanding the context, creating evidence through an appreciative dialogue" (November).

HR

In 2020, the HR department focused on updating the staff scheme, as prompted by the introduction of the Dutch Act regulating the legal position of government officials (WNRA) on 1 January. The terms of employment are being adapted in the purview of the implementation of the Individual Elective Budget (IKB). In addition, a collective industrial disability insurance was taken out. Furthermore, this past year, the HR department worked on the switch to a new salary system.

In the year under review, NVAO staff accounted for 50.38 FTEs (2019: 49.86) (see Table 7). In 2020, NVAO welcomed a total of 11 new colleagues and bade farewell to 12 staff.

Table 7: NVAO FTEs per position, as of 31 December (excluding Board/temps, including secondments)

	2019	2020
Policy advisors	21.67	20.6
Internationalisation	1.62	2.11
Support and Operations	19.17	20.67
Management and Directors	4.22	4.22
Board	3.18	2.78
Total staff in FTEs	49.86	50.38

The NVAO building in The Hague is also home to the Committee for Effective Higher Education (CDHO) and the Committee for Macro Efficiency in Vocational Training (CMMBO). These committees operate independently, but NVAO bears responsibility for the logistics, facilities, and staffing of the committees (see Table 8).

Table 8: CDHO/CMMBO FTEs per position, as of 31 December (excluding temps, including secondments)

	2019	2020
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CDHO	3.34	4.83
CMMBO	2.45	1.56
Total staff in FTEs	5.79	6.39

Internal quality assurance

Audit panel

The Board of NVAO checks the internal quality assurance of NVAO through an Audit Panel, composed of three Dutch and Flemish members of the Board. The internal audit procedure encompasses the monitoring of the mandate scheme within NVAO Netherlands.

The Netherlands

NVAO Netherlands continuously evaluates the primary work processes upon the completion of accreditation procedures for existing or new programmes. In addition, the year 2020 saw evaluations of the Institutional Audit, the Quality Agreements, the Initial Accreditation procedure, and the processing of accreditation applications and similar procedures. Besides online interviews, focus meetings were held with various parties involved.

Based on the first round of quality assurance activities under the new system, NVAO Netherlands has come to the conclusion that it is appreciated in the education world, especially when it comes to professionalism and expertise. Across the board, it is living up to its own strategic values in actual practice. Some points for improvement have also been identified: communication during the procedures leaves room for improvement. Calibration and consultation regarding the working methods of process coordinators remains essential, as does the prevention of mistakes in documents. The department will continue to work on this. In addition, maintaining the positive appreciation of stakeholders remains imperative.

Flanders

At the end of 2019, the contact manager concept was introduced in the operations of NVAO Flanders. In this capacity, policy advisors serve as the first contacts for the institutions; by participating in their internal procedures, they are included in the institutional context. In 2020, this position was rolled out in full. The institutions greatly appreciate this commitment. In 2020, NVAO Flanders also developed a new approach to the continuous evaluation and follow-up of assessment procedures.

The COVID-19 issue and changes within the Board precluded the formal Round of Reviews of all the institutions in Flanders in 2020. Nonetheless, the dialogue with the institutions continued in the purview of following up the assessments.

Employees Council

In 2020, the Employees Council held six regular consultative meetings and one additional interim consultation with the employer. The first regular consultative meeting, at the end of January 2020, involved the Employees Council in its old constitution, whose term ended by 29 February 2020. In the election period, a total of five colleagues put themselves up to sit on the Employees Council for the term of 1 March 2020 to 28 February 2023. The new Council held its first meeting in April 2020. During this meeting, the Chair and the Secretary/Secretaries were appointed, which was confirmed by email. The Vice Chair was appointed during the June 2020 meeting, which was also confirmed by email. In the final quarter of 2020, one of the Council members was unable to attend for a period of time, owing to personal circumstances. Furthermore, an official secretary was appointed on a temporary basis.

The meeting agendas and the reports on the consultations between the employer and the Employees Council were shared with the staff via the Intranet. Recurrent items on the agenda were the COVID-19 measures; the action plan to follow up the staff satisfaction survey conducted at the end of 2018; the staff outing of 14 November 2019; and the introduction of the national job classification system. As was the case the year before, 2020 was dominated by many HR-related activities within the organisation. Agenda items included the staff scheme

(which was approved by the Employees Council); the individual selective budget; the salary system; the collective industrial disability insurance; the risk inventory and evaluation (RI&E) and the associated action plan; the in-house emergency and first-aid service plan; and the change in company medical officer / Health and Safety Executive. Furthermore, the Employees Council provided advice regarding and/or approved the information security policy; the information session on personal data protection and data leaks protocol; the external complaints procedure; the whistle blower regulations; and the integrity policy. In addition, the Employees Council was informed on the annual accounts; the annual plan and the budget for 2021; and the long-term budget for 2021-2024.

The Employees Council had intended to draw up a procedure for its structural processing of documents. Such a procedure has not yet been formalised, but some informal steps have been taken towards its substantiation. Examples include the early announcement of the agenda to staff via the Intranet; the submission of documents; and the procedure regarding documents for which the Employees Council has the right of advice and approval, respectively.

In July 2020, the Board announced an organisational change. In this context, the Employees Council set up an additional meeting with the employer in December 2020. The Council is eager to provide constructive input in such an organisational change and would like to remain closely involved in the process.

Confidential advisors

NVAO has appointed a confidential advisor for matters involving inappropriate conduct and one for integrity issues. These two roles have been vested with a single staff member. An external confidential advisor for matters involving inappropriate conduct is employed by the Bezemer & Schubad agency in Rotterdam. Staff are free to choose whether to speak to a confidential advisor and if so, which confidential advisor to contact.

In 2020, the external confidential advisor did not conduct any interviews. The internal confidential advisor conducted a total of 16 interviews at the request of four NVAO staff, pertaining to events that took place in December 2019 in relation to inappropriate conduct. The notifiers felt safe within the organisation, which helped them to “out” their report to the competent authorities. On five occasions, the confidential adviser contacted members of the Board or the Management Team to coordinate the steps to be taken regarding the reports submitted. The issues have been dealt with to the satisfaction of the notifiers with the departure of the staff member involved. NVAO will continue to encourage the desired open organisation culture of actively sharing and maintaining professional norms and values.

The roles of confidential advisor for inappropriate conduct and integrity were formalised further in 2020. A new procedure was drawn up, linked to the reformulation of the code of conduct and the complaints procedure. The staff have been informed about the new procedures.



