



NVAO • FLANDERS

QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM FLANDERS 2019-2025

ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK INITIAL ACCREDITATION

JUNE 2020

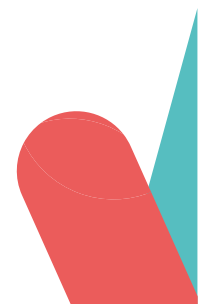


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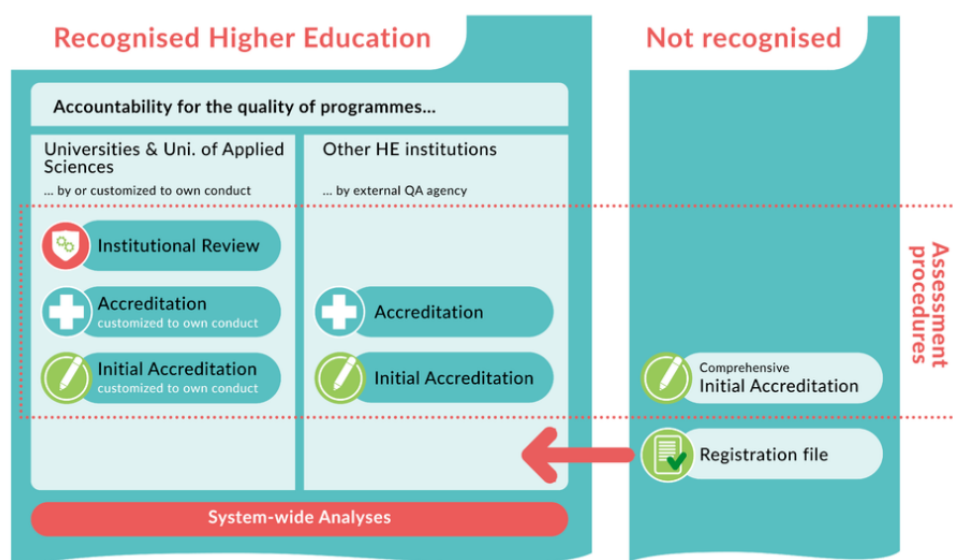
This assessment framework applies to the registered institutions, to the institutions for post-initial education, scientific research and scientific service, and to the recognised faculties for protestant theology.

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Overview of the quality assurance system for 2019-2025

The Quality Assurance System – Flanders 2019-2025 focuses on the quality of individual programmes and its accountability. This is achieved either through the institutional review that enables universities and universities of applied sciences and arts to account for the quality of their programmes themselves, or through the involvement of an external body. An external body is a quality assurance agency registered on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR, www.eqar.eu), or recognised by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO, www.nvaio.net) on the basis of a collaboration agreement warranting that the external assessment is conducted in accordance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015). External, independent experts (peers) are engaged in each assessment of educational quality, either by the institution itself or in the assessment panel convened by NVAO or a quality assurance agency.



Recognised higher education

Universities and universities of applied sciences and arts

Universities and universities of applied sciences and arts are solely responsible for confirming the quality of their programmes. They give account to society by publishing information on the quality of each NVAO accredited programme on their website. The **institutional review** assesses the manner in which a university or university of applied sciences and arts pursues its educational policy. Within its educational policy, each institution includes a conduct for confirming the quality of its programmes. This responsibility for confirming the quality of programmes applies to accredited programmes. For this reason, each new programme to be launched is first subjected to an **initial accreditation**, a procedure in which an external panel assesses the potential quality of the programme. The period of recognition as a new programme is followed by a fully-fledged **programme accreditation**: the official decision by NVAO that the programme meets pre-determined requirements regarding quality and level. Following such programme accreditation (with a positive outcome), responsibility for confirming the quality of the programme is vested with the universities and universities of applied sciences

and arts themselves. Should an institutional review show a university's or university of applied sciences and arts' inability to confirm the quality of its accredited programmes, NVAO will regain this responsibility. The confirmation of quality will then be done by NVAO on a programme-by-programme basis.

The initial accreditation and programme accreditation procedures are tailor-made: they are designed to optimally complement each institution's conduct for confirming the quality of its other programmes. We here refer to conduct-tailored procedures.

Other institutions

All the other recognised higher education institutions give account of the quality of their programmes through the involvement of an external body. Each new programme to be launched is first subjected to an **initial accreditation**. Subsequently, it is subjected to periodic **programme accreditations**.

System-wide analyses

System-wide analyses are intended to map out and share good practices within the higher education community. This encourages institutions to learn from one another, specifically with respect to issues relating to educational policy and programme quality.

Non-recognised higher education

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

1 Introduction

The initial accreditation is an (ex ante) assessment of the potential quality of a new programme. A new programme is a programme that does not appear in the Higher Education Register for the applicant institution. NVAO bases its accreditation decision on an assessment of the potential programme quality by a panel of experts.

The Flemish quality assurance system is based on trust and vests a large measure of responsibility with the institutions. In order to have this perspective reflected in the assessment procedures, NVAO and the assessment panel adopt NVAO's Appreciative Approach. Rather than a quality assurance model, NVAO's Appreciative Approach constitutes a philosophy, a mind-set, a style or an attitude that directs the methodology of the procedure and the substantiation of all its components. Through NVAO's Appreciative Approach, the focus is placed on "what" is and "what" could be within the applicable context, without focusing on what should be or substantiating the "how". The latter falls under the autonomy of the institution or the programme. NVAO's Appreciative Approach does not hinder the formation of judgements, but relies on dialogue, on co-creation, and on common understanding.

In its assessment of the quality, the panel takes the programme's context as its starting point. An open dialogue is a key element in the procedure. Special attention is paid to what is going well, with an emphasis on the embedding and fostering of successful processes. Nonetheless, the panel will bring out and critically examine any lack of clarity or points for attention, with the goal of coming to a weighted and well-supported judgement.

In line with the above philosophy, it is up to the programme to interpret and further substantiate this assessment framework.

The assessment framework at hand contains the assessment principle and the assessment procedure to be followed.

I. Assessment principle

The assessment principle comprises two aspects: on the one hand, the assessment ground underpinning the assessment of the quality of a programme, and on the other hand, the assessment scale and assessment rule applied by the panel for its substantiated judgement regarding the potential quality of the programme.

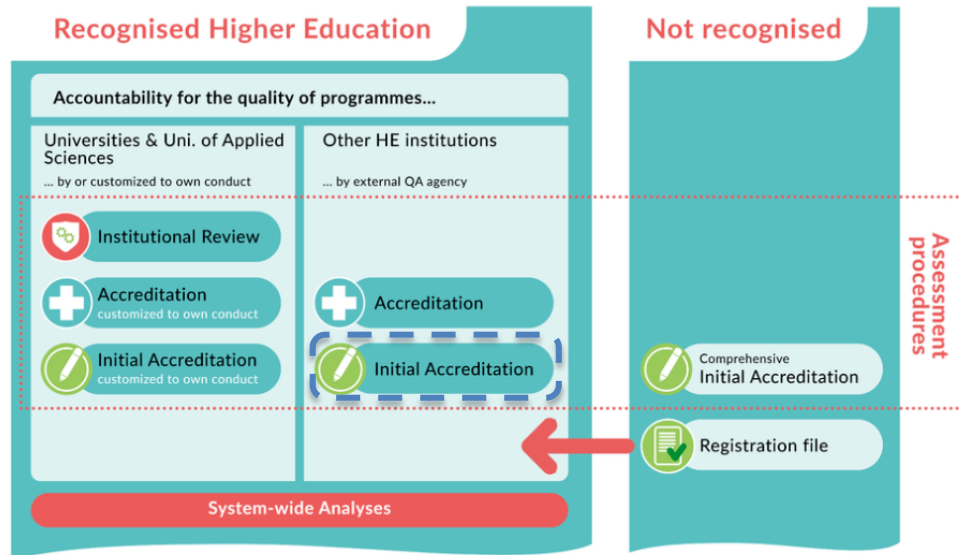
The quality of a programme is demonstrated by reference to eight quality features. These quality features are the characteristics of a high-quality higher education programme; they tie in with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015). They provide higher education programmes with a basis for substantiating quality. For every programme with demonstrated quality, the manifestation of the quality features is confirmed.

In addition, the assessment panel verifies how, on the one hand, internal and external stakeholders, and on the other hand, external and independent peers and experts are involved in the development of the programme and how this involvement will be ensured in the future in a continuous pursuit of quality enhancement.

If applicable, the panel verifies whether the programme meets the regulations with respect to the admission of graduates to corresponding posts or professions.

II. Assessment procedure

The assessment procedure is coordinated by NVAO.



The position of the presented assessment procedure within the Flemish Quality Assurance System.

2 Assessment principle

2.1 Assessment ground

The assessment of the potential quality of the new programme is substantiated on the basis of four coherent questions:

- What does the programme intend?
- How does the programme want to realise its intentions ?
- How will the achievement of these intentions be demonstrated?
- How is the programme investing in continuous quality enhancement?

The above questions determine the scope of the investigation conducted in the light of the assessment.

In the light of NVAO's Appreciative Approach, the new programme has the space to respond to the context in which it finds itself. Substantive choices are not questioned, but must match the way the programme presents itself. The programme is involving, on the one hand, internal and external stakeholders, and on the other, external and independent peers and experts. Furthermore, it meets the relevant regulations pertaining to the admission of graduates to corresponding posts or professions.

The quality of programmes is assured in an internationally accepted manner. This entails that the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015) are followed. The quality features are a translation of the ESG elements that typify high-quality higher education programmes. However, the quality features are not separate standards that have to be judged individually.

For every programme with demonstrated quality, the manifestation of all of the following quality features is confirmed:

1. The programme's learning outcomes constitute a transparent and programme-specific interpretation of the international requirements regarding level, content, and orientation;
2. The programme's curriculum ties in with the most recent developments in the discipline, takes account of the developments in the professional field, and is relevant to society;
3. The staff allocated to the programme provide the students with optimum opportunities for achieving the learning outcomes;
4. The programme offers the students adequate and easily accessible services, facilities, and counselling;
5. The teaching and learning environment encourages the students to play an active role in the learning process and fosters smooth study progress;
6. The assessment of students reflects the learning process and concretises the intended learning outcomes;
7. The programme provides comprehensive and readable information on all stages of study;
8. Information regarding the quality of the programme is publicly accessible.

2.2 Assessment scale and assessment rule

Assessment scale

The assessment of the potential quality of the programme prompts one of the following decisions:

- positive initial accreditation decision;
- negative initial accreditation decision.

Assessment rule for the initial accreditation decision

The potential quality of the programme is assessed on the basis of the integral assessment ground, whereby the coherent questions are not weighted separately. The decision ensues from a holistic and substantiated judgement based on the findings from the investigation conducted.

The basic philosophy of the quality assurance system dictates that the assessment is based on the assumption that the potential quality of the programme meets the assessment ground. The contrary must be substantiated in detail.

Positive initial accreditation decision

The potential quality of the programme can be demonstrated on the basis of the assessment ground. Recommendations never conflict with a positive accreditation decision.

Negative initial accreditation decision

With respect to well-defined aspects of the assessment ground, the potential quality of the programme cannot be demonstrated. Any quality deficiency must be explicitly substantiated by reference to (a) condition(s) that must be met in order to remedy the deficiency.

3 Assessment procedure

In accordance with NVAO's Appreciative Approach, all the steps in the assessment process are designed in an appreciative manner, from the training of the panel members to the investigation conducted by the panel and the final report.

3.1 Preliminary consultations (optional)

In the build-up to the official application, the programme (institution) may conduct preliminary consultations with NVAO, up to three months before the potential submission date of the application file, to confer on the following aspects:

- Timing and steps in the procedure, including the schedule for the dialogue between the panel and the programme (institution);
- Profile of the assessment panel and combination of expertise commanded by the members;
- Drafting of the Information File and documentation to be submitted;
- Structure of the dialogue.

3.2 Information File

The programme draws up an Information File that provides the panel with insight into what the new programme is aiming for, how it wants to realise its aims, how the realisation of such aims will be demonstrated, and how the programme is investing in continuous quality enhancement. Attention is paid to the context within which the new programme will be taught, and to the manner in which internal and external stakeholders, peers, and experts have been involved in the development of the programme and how this involvement will be ensured in the future. If applicable, the Information File refers to relevant regulations regarding the admission of graduates to certain posts or professions.

The Information File enables the assessment panel to carry out an investigation in order to answer the four coherent questions.

The Information File is a self-contained document that can be read in its own right. It comprises a maximum of 25 pages, excluding the appendices with required documentation as listed in Chapter 4. The format and substantiation of the Information File are not specified; they fall under the autonomy of the programme. Information that is (publicly) available on the website may be provided by means of a web link.

3.3 Application

The assessment procedure starts when an application for initial accreditation of a new programme is submitted to NVAO. Institutions providing a new jointly organised programme must submit a joint application.

Applications must meet the following procedural requirements: they must be submitted electronically via our procedural webpage or via aanvraag@nvaonet, comprising an application letter signed by the board of the institution and the Information File as described in paragraph 3.2. Upon his/her request, the institution will send a hard copy version to a panel member.

The institutions for post-initial education, scientific research and scientific service, and the recognised faculties for protestant theology must submit their application within a timeframe of 15 calendar days after receipt of a positive judgement concerning the macro-efficiency, issued

by the Higher Education Commission or the Flemish Government, or following expiry of the term within which the Flemish Government is to pronounce judgement.

3.4 Admissibility

NVAO will check the admissibility of the application to verify whether the procedural requirements have been met. If the application is inadmissible, the institution will be informed accordingly within a timeframe of 15 calendar days. Subsequently, the institution has 30 calendar days to complete its application, in consultation with the process coordinator from NVAO. Should it fail to submit a full dossier within the stipulated time, the application will be declared definitively inadmissible.

3.5 Relevance test

NVAO has the option to submit applications from the registered institutions to the Higher Education Commission for a relevance test. On the basis of the relevance test, the Higher Education Commission examines the societal relevance of the programme. The Higher Education Commission forwards its judgement to NVAO within a limitation period of 45 calendar days. A negative judgement from the Higher Education Commission irrevocably results in the application being declared inadmissible. NVAO informs the institution about this outcome.

3.6 Payment for the procedure

Once the application has been found admissible, the institution will receive a request for full payment of the cost of the assessment procedure. The rate applicable to this procedure is fixed by the Flemish Minister of Education. It covers the costs entailed in the work performed by the panel (remuneration, travel expenses, hotel accommodation, et cetera), which are paid by NVAO.

3.7 Composition of the panel

NVAO appoints the panel that will conduct the assessment of the new programme. The review by peers is at the heart of the Flemish quality assurance system. A panel consists of a number of experts who are in a position to make a judgement on the (potential) quality of the new programme. In order to be able to take the context of the programme into account, NVAO always confers with the programme (institution) when convening a panel.

An assessment panel comprises a minimum of four members, among whom a student; it is supported by an NVAO process coordinator and possibly an external secretary. The NVAO process coordinator and the external secretary do not sit on the panel.

In order to warrant an objective and fair assessment, the panel must be able to work independently from the programme. This means that over the five years prior to the appointment of the panel, its members must not have had any connections or ties with the institution providing the programme. All the panel members, the secretary, and the process coordinator must sign a code of deontology. This code of deontology is published on the NVAO website.

The panel must be authoritative. To this end, it combines the following types of expertise:

- In order to take maximum account of a programme's specific context and to survey the broader framework within which a programme is taught, the panel must command thorough knowledge of higher education in Flanders;
- International expertise is represented on the panel in order to enable it to verify whether the programme meets common international standards in terms of content, orientation, and level, and insofar as applicable, whether it meets the requirements that the international professional field sets for graduates. International expertise is commanded by at least one panel member who is employed outside Flanders;
- Subject-specific expertise is focused on the developments in the discipline. A subject-specific expert teaches or has taught within the same or a similar programme with the same orientation, and contributes to the development of the professional practice, the discipline or the field of study;
- Educational expertise refers to recent experience in teaching or educational development at the relevant programme level and to expertise regarding the education and learning/teaching formats provided by the programme;
- Evaluation expertise enables the panel to assess whether the programme is capable of assuring the quality of education;
- The professional field expert commands a good overview of the requirements that the professional field sets for graduates;
- Student-related expertise enables the panel to verify whether the programme is student-centred and safeguards the interests of students in such aspects as the information provision to students, student facilities, student counselling and guidance, and student participation. Preferably, student experts have experience as a student representative within a programme or institution.

Panel members are still active (not necessarily employed) in their field of expertise at the time at which the panel is appointed. This also applies to the student who sits on the panel.

NVAO informs the institution of the panel composition. The institution has the right to lodge a substantiated appeal to the panel composition within a timeframe of 15 calendar days. In addition, the institution is required to inform NVAO, within that same timeframe, of any information it has regarding the expertise and independence of panel members.

The process coordinator monitors the substantive philosophy of the quality assurance system and the methodology of the procedure and ensures that the panel conducts its investigation in that spirit and in accordance with NVAO's Appreciative Approach. To safeguard this, all the panel members receive thorough training by NVAO prior to the procedure. This training prepares the panel members for their tasks and responsibilities, and trains them in practicing NVAO's Appreciative Approach. Furthermore, NVAO provides the panel members with a manual on its Appreciative Approach.

3.8 Dialogue with the programme (institution)

The panel is allowed a minimum period of six weeks to peruse the Information File and the accompanying documentation. As part of the panel's investigation, NVAO organises a dialogue between the panel and the programme (institution). The format and planning of the dialogue are agreed upon in consultation with the programme (institution) and the panel. Usually the dialogue includes a site visit. If the panel can include findings from a site visit that was carried out in the context of another assessment procedure or if the panel is of the opinion that a physical site visit offers no added value for its investigation, it can decide not to conduct a (new)

site visit. Instead, it can enter into a dialogue with the program (institution) via a (series of) online conversation(s). The combination of a site visit and online conversations is also possible, for example to speak to certain stakeholders for whom the physical relocation is difficult. During (a) preliminary meeting(s) the panel prepares for the dialogue with the programme (institution).

The schedule of the site visit is structured in a manner that enables the panel to fulfil its duties. The panel is asked to flesh out the schedule based on this proposal by NVAO; the details are discussed with the programme (institution). The process coordinator liaises between the panel and the programme in this matter. Once the schedule is finalised, the programme may indicate the positions/functions for which it is proposing conversation partners. Participants may take part in multiple conversations.

The following conversation partners must certainly be involved in the dialogue:

- Institutional management;
- Staff responsible for the programme;
- (Intended) teaching staff;
- Students enrolled in the new programme (if any) or another related programme from the institution;
- Representatives from the professional field.

Considering that a panel may request additional information, or that the institution may wish to present further information in the process of the dialogue, the schedule features an open timeslot. This also enables the programme to submit additional documentation to the panel or to schedule additional interviews.

If, during the assessment process, matters arise that could impact the independence of the assessment, stakeholders such as panel members, process coordinators, secretaries, staff of the institution, or students, may report such matters to NVAO via the complaints procedure available on the website.

3.9 Assessment and assessment report

The investigation conducted by the panel is structured by reference to the four coherent questions contained in the assessment ground. It should be noted, in this respect, that the questions need not be addressed separately during the investigation; however, the assessment report that sets out the findings of the panel must allow the reader to answer the questions.

During the dialogue with the programme and the preliminary meeting of the panel, the secretary collects all the input from the panel members and draws up a report that constitutes the basis for the assessment report.

In its assessment report, the panel advises NVAO on the quality of the programme as a whole. Its final judgement on the two-point scale – “positive accreditation decision” or “negative accreditation decision” – is substantiated by reference to the positive and critical elements observed during the assessment of the potential quality of the new programme.

The assessment report comprises 15 to 20 pages and is preceded by a concise summary of the findings and the judgement of the panel. The assessment report must include the following data:

- The administrative data of the institution and the programme as listed in paragraph 4.1;
- The composition of the panel;
- The schedule of the dialogue with the programme;
- An overview of the material studied;
- A list of abbreviations.

After all the panel members have approved the contents of the assessment report, the panel chair will endorse the report. The draft assessment report is forwarded to NVAO within four weeks after the dialogue with the programme. NVAO assesses the internal consistency of the report and the justification of the advice and, if necessary, NVAO will suggest adjustments to the panel to clarify the findings or strengthen the substantiation of the advice. Ownership of the assessment report remains vested with the panel.

3.10 Decision-making

Within an indicative period of six months following receipt of the application (eight months if NVAO opts for the relevance test), NVAO will take an initial accreditation decision; before expiry of this period, it will forward a draft decision and the underlying assessment report from the panel to the board of the institution. NVAO can take two possible decisions: positive or negative. In its decision, NVAO may deviate from the judgement contained in the assessment report, stating its reasons to do so. When drawing up its draft decision, NVAO may ask the institution and/or the panel for additional information, explanations, and clarifications.

Before the definitive endorsement of the initial accreditation decision and within a 15-calendar-day limitation period, which commences as from the day after their receipt, NVAO affords the board of the institution the opportunity either to formulate comments and/or objections to the draft accreditation decision and/or the underlying assessment report, or to withdraw the application.

The board of an institution can also withdraw an initial application before receiving the draft decision and the underlying assessment report.

Once the initial application has been withdrawn, the board of an institution for post-initial education, scientific research and scientific service, or of a recognised faculty for protestant theology, has an expiry period of 60 calendar days to resubmit the application for initial accreditation of a new programme to the accreditation organisation. The expiry period starts on the day following the withdrawal of the initial application. After this expiry period, the institution will have to request a new judgement concerning the macro-efficiency of the new programme from the Higher Education Commission.

The drafts will be amended wherever necessary. NVAO forwards its definitive initial accreditation decision with the underlying assessment report from the panel to the institution and to the Flemish Minister of Education. Ultimately, it is the Flemish Government that takes the decision to recognise a new programme. The decision is taken within an indicative timeframe of 30 calendar days after the definitive initial accreditation decision has been sent by NVAO.

The newly recognised programme is considered to be accredited up to the end of the second academic year following the academic year in which the duration of study determined for the new programme was completed for the first time.

3.11 Internal and external appeals

Any (draft) decision by NVAO is open to an internal appeal to NVAO and an external appeal to the Council of State, in accordance with the Regulations for decision-making procedures by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders [In Dutch: "Reglement inzake bestuursbeginselen van toepassing bij de besluitvorming door de Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie – NVAO Vlaanderen"].

3.12 Publication

After the decision-making procedure, NVAO publishes the decision and the underlying assessment report on its website, and forwards both documents to the Flemish Minister of Education.

4 Required documentation

The programme provides a limited number of documents to the panel as an annex to the Information File. NVAO expects that it concerns existing documents that are available within the programme or institution and that are not drawn up specifically for the initial accreditation procedure. The documents serve to substantiate and verify the Information File. Additional documentation is only necessary if the panel explicitly requests it.

4.1 Administrative data regarding the institution and the programme

The administrative data are included in the application.

Administrative data regarding the institution:

1. name;
2. address, website;
3. name, position, telephone number and email address of the liaison.

Administrative data regarding the programme:

1. the degree, the qualification of the degree, and if applicable, the specification of the degree;
2. if applicable, the title that holders of the degree conferred by this programme may use;
3. the field of study, part of a field of study or fields of study within which the programme is categorised;
4. the majors/specialisations, if any;
5. the listing of potential programme routes for working students, full-time/part-time education, day/evening trajectories, different formats of certification;
6. the location(s) at which the programme is taught;
7. the language of instruction;
8. the workload expressed in credits;
9. the programme-specific learning outcomes;
10. in the event of an associate's or bachelor's programme: the connecting options and potential further education; in the event of a master's programme: the required prior education and admission requirements.

4.2 Required annexes to the Information File

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

1. If available, the domain-specific learning outcomes;
2. The corresponding programme(s) in the Flemish higher education system or, if they do not exist, the corresponding programme name in neighbouring countries;
3. A schematic overview of the entire curriculum;
4. A description of the content of the curriculum components of the first 60 credits, stating the intended learning outcomes, teaching/learning formats, manner of assessment, literature (required/recommended), number of credits (ECTS sheets);
5. A description of the staff: documents that provide insight in the required competencies of the already present and intended profiles;
6. Overview of the contacts with the professional field;

7. The investment plan for the entire programme (not applicable to the institutions for post-initial education, scientific research and scientific service, nor to the recognised faculties for protestant theology).

4.3 Documents (digitally) available for preparation, during or after the dialogue and site visit

For preparation of the dialogue with the programme and site visit

1. Educational vision and policy;
2. Assessment policy, staff professionalisation (including HR policy if available) and student counselling and guidance;
3. Teaching and examination regulations;
4. Reports of consultations in relevant committees/bodies.

During the dialogue with the programme and site visit

1. Available manuals and study material.

Prior to, during or after the dialogue with the programme, the panel may request additional information from the programme in order to come to a judgement. The panel must justify such a request. The list of documents studied is included in the assessment report.

Colophon

QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM FLANDERS 2019-
2025

Assessment framework initial accreditation

June 2020

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Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie
Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders

Parkstraat 28 • 2514 JK Den Haag
P.O. Box 85498 • 2508 CD The Hague
The Netherlands

T +31 (0)70 312 23 00
E info@nvao.net
www.nvao.net