



NVAO • FLANDERS

QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM FLANDERS 2025-2031

ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK
COMPREHENSIVE INITIAL ACCREDITATION

SEPTEMBER 2025



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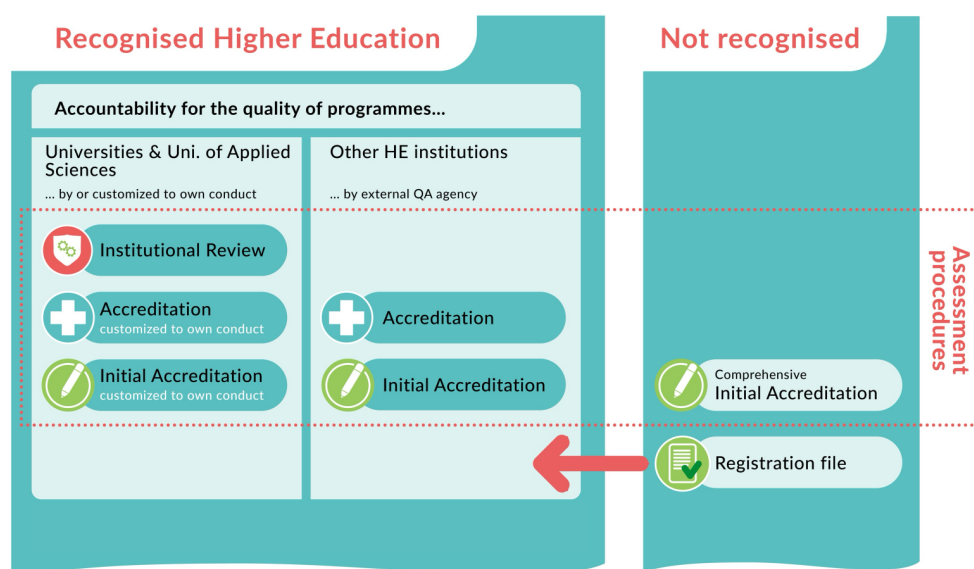
This assessment framework applies to non-recognised higher education providers who apply for registration with the Flemish Government as a provider of recognised higher education.

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Overview of the quality assurance system for 2025-2031

The Quality Assurance System - Flanders 2025-2031 focuses on the quality of individual programmes and its accountability. This is achieved cyclically either through the institutional review, which enables universities and universities of applied sciences to account for the quality of their programmes themselves, or through accreditation, which establishes the achieved quality of a programme. External, independent experts (peers) are engaged in each assessment of educational quality, either by the institution itself or through a panel convened by NVAO or by an external evaluation body.



Recognised higher education

Universities and universities of applied sciences and arts

Universities and universities of applied sciences are solely responsible for confirming the quality of their programmes. They give account to society by publishing information on the quality of each accredited programme on their website. The institutional review assesses the manner in which a university or university of applied sciences 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. Following recognition as a new programme, the programme is also subjected to a first programme accreditation: the official decision by NVAO that the programme meets pre-determined minimum quality and level requirements. Following the first programme accreditation (with a positive outcome), responsibility for confirming the quality of the programme is vested with the universities and universities of applied sciences themselves. Should an institutional review show a university's or university of applied sciences' inability to confirm the quality of its accredited programmes, NVAO will regain this responsibility. The confirmation of quality will then be carried out by NVAO on a programme-by-programme basis.

The initial accreditation and programme accreditation procedures are designed to optimally complement the conduct that the institution has in place 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 evaluation body. An external evaluation body is a quality assurance agency either registered on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR, www.eqar.eu) or recognised by NVAO 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). The latter applies to external evaluation bodies that also perform quality assurance activities outside the European Higher Education Area.

Each new programme to be launched is subjected to an initial accreditation coordinated by NVAO and subsequently to periodic programme accreditations.

Non-recognised higher education

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

1 Introduction

Comprehensive initial accreditation is an (ex ante) assessment of the potential quality of a new programme of a non-recognised education provider that wishes to be registered by the Flemish Government as a provider of recognised higher education. A non-recognised education provider is an institution that does not appear in the Higher Education Register. NVAO bases its initial accreditation decision on an assessment of the potential programme quality by a panel of external, independent experts.

The present assessment framework comprises 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 on the basis of which the quality of a programme is assessed 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.

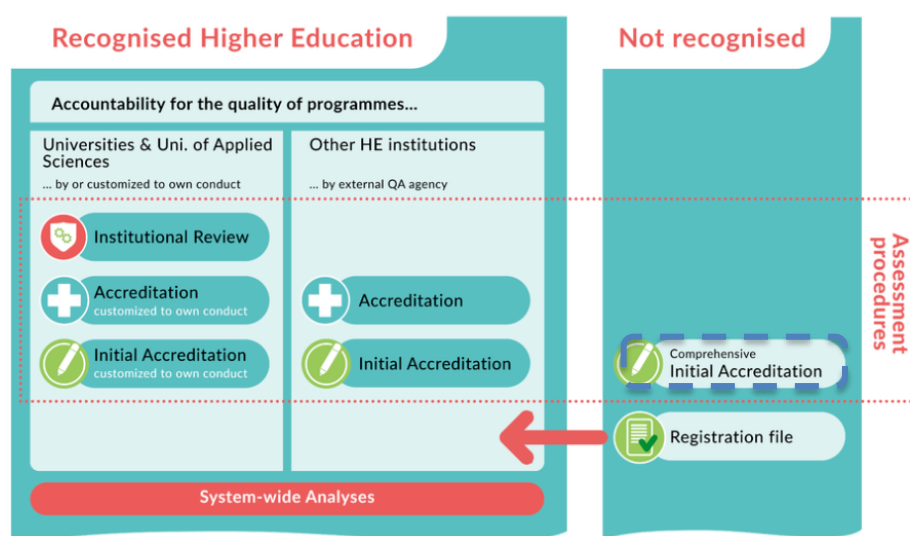
The quality of a programme is demonstrated by reference to eight quality features. These quality features are the characteristics of a high-quality higher education programme and tie in with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015). They provide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

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

If applicable, the panel verifies whether the programme complies with the regulations governing access to corresponding offices 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 designed on the basis of four coherent questions:

- What does the programme intend?
- How does the programme want to realise this?
- How will it be established that what was intended has been achieved?
- How does the programme invest in continuous quality enhancement?

These questions determine the scope of the investigation conducted for the purpose of the assessment.

The programme involves internal and external stakeholders on the one hand and external and independent experts on the other hand. In addition, it complies with the relevant regulations governing access to certain offices or professions.

The quality assurance of programmes takes place in an internationally accepted manner. This means 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 elements from the ESG that characterise high-quality higher education programmes. However, the quality features are not separate standards that must each lead to a separate judgement.

For a programme whose quality meets the requirements, the manifestation of all of the following quality features is confirmed:

- The programme's learning outcomes constitute a clear and programme-specific interpretation of the international requirements regarding level, content and orientation;
- The programme's curriculum ties in with the most recent developments in the discipline, takes account of developments in the professional field and is relevant to society;
- The teaching staff allocated to the programme provide students with optimum opportunities for achieving the learning outcomes;
- The programme offers students adequate and easily accessible facilities and counselling;
- The teaching and learning environment encourages students to play an active role in the learning process and contributes to smooth study progress;
- The assessment of students reflects the learning process and concretises the intended learning outcomes;
- The programme provides complete and easily readable information on all phases of the study career;
- Information on 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 follows from a holistic and substantiated judgement based on the findings from the investigation conducted and is substantiated in detail.

Positive initial accreditation decision

The potential quality of the programme can be demonstrated on the basis of the assessment ground. Recommendations are never at odds with a positive initial 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 is explicitly substantiated by reference to one or more conditions that must be met in order to remedy the deficiency.

3 Assessment procedure

3.1 Preliminary consultations

In the run-up to the formal application, the programme (institution) may hold preliminary consultations with NVAO no later than three months before the potential submission date of the application file in order to coordinate the following aspects:

- Timing and steps in the procedure, including the planning of the dialogue between the panel and the programme (institution);
- The panel profile and the combination of expertise;
- The drafting of the Information File and the documentation to be supplied;
- The design of the panel's investigation.

3.2 Information File

The programme draws up an Information File that serves a dual purpose:

- Reflecting on its own planned educational practice, while ensuring that this reflection is broadly supported;
- Providing the panel with insight into what the new programme intends, how it wishes to realise this, how it will be established that what is intended has been achieved, and how the programme invests in continuous quality enhancement.

The Information File pays attention to the context within which the new programme is offered and to the manner in which internal and external stakeholders and experts were involved in the development of the programme and how this involvement will be ensured in the future. If applicable, the Information File refers to the relevant regulations governing access to certain offices or professions.

The Information File enables the panel to conduct an investigation into the answers to the four coherent questions.

The Information File is a self-contained document that can be read independently. It comprises a maximum of 15,000 words, excluding the required documentation in the annex, as set out in Chapter 4. The specific format and content of the Information File are not prescribed and fall within the autonomy of the programme. Information that is publicly available on the website may be provided via a web link.

3.3 Application

The institution applies for registration by submitting a registration file to the Flemish Government. At the same time, the institution submits an application for comprehensive initial accreditation to NVAO. As a procedural requirement, the application must be submitted electronically via the procedural webpage, or in an emergency by email via aanvraag@nvao.org, and must consist of an application letter signed by the board of the institution and the Information File as described under 3.2. If a panel member so requests, the institution sends a paper version to that panel member.

3.4 Admissibility

NVAO checks the admissibility of the application in order to verify whether the procedural requirement has been met. If the application is inadmissible, the institution will be informed accordingly within a timeframe of 15 calendar days. Subsequently, the institution must complete the application in consultation with the process coordinator within a timeframe of 30 calendar days. If a full dossier is not submitted on time, the application will be declared definitively inadmissible.

3.5 Relevance test

Applications are submitted by NVAO to the Higher Education Commission for a relevance test. The Higher Education Commission is a commission of experts that assesses the macro-efficiency or relevance of programmes in Flemish higher education. By means 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 accordingly.

3.6 Payment for the procedure

Once the application has been found admissible, the institution will receive a request to pay the cost of the comprehensive initial accreditation in full. The rate applicable to this procedure is fixed by the Flemish Minister of Education. The costs entailed in the work performed by the panel, such as remuneration, travel expenses and overnight accommodation, are paid by NVAO from this amount.

3.7 Composition of the panel

NVAO composes the panel that conducts the comprehensive initial accreditation. Within the Flemish quality assurance system, peer review is central. 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 takes the initiative to involve the programme (institution) in the composition of the panel.

A panel comprises a minimum of four members, including a student, and is supported by an NVAO process coordinator and, where applicable, an external secretary. Neither of them sits 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 panel members, the secretary and the process coordinator sign a code of deontology to this end. This code of deontology is published on the NVAO website.

The panel must be authoritative and, to this end, combines the following forms of expertise:

- In order to take maximum account of the specific context of a programme and to survey the broader framework within which a programme is offered, the panel commands thorough knowledge of Flemish higher education;
- International expertise is represented on the panel in order to enable it to verify whether the programme, in terms of content, orientation and level, meets what is common internationally and, insofar as applicable, meets the requirements that international professional practice sets for graduates. International expertise is present in at least one panel member who is employed outside Flanders;
- Subject-specific expertise focuses on developments in the discipline. A subject-specific expert teaches or has taught in the same or a related programme with the same orientation and contributes to the development of professional practice, the discipline or the field of study;
- Educational expertise refers to recent experience in teaching or developing education at the relevant programme level and to expertise regarding the education and teaching formats used by the programme;
- Evaluation expertise gives the panel the expertise required to assess whether the programme is capable of confirming 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 student-centredness and students' interests are safeguarded in such aspects as information provision for students,

student facilities, counselling and student participation. Student experts preferably have experience as a student representative within a programme or institution.

Panel members are still active in their field of expertise, not necessarily in employment, at the time at which the panel is appointed. This also applies to the student on the panel.

NVAO informs the institution of the panel composition. The institution has the right to submit substantiated objections to the composition of the panel 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 methodology of the procedure. To safeguard this, all panel members receive thorough training from NVAO prior to the procedure. This training prepares the panel members for their tasks and responsibilities.

3.8 Dialogue with the programme (institution)

The panel has at least six weeks to review 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 of this dialogue is determined in consultation with the programme (institution) and the panel. A site visit is always part of this. A combination of a site visit and online meetings is also possible, for example in order to speak with certain stakeholders for whom physical travel is difficult.

The panel prepares for the dialogue with the programme (institution) during one or more preliminary meetings.

For this dialogue, the programme is designed in such a way that it enables the panel to carry out its task. Based on a programme proposal by NVAO, the panel determines the content of the programme, which is discussed with the programme (institution). The process coordinator acts as an intermediary between the panel and the programme. Once the final programme is known, the programme may indicate the functions from which it proposes discussion partners.

The following discussion partners must definitely be involved across the interviews:

- Institutional management;
- Programme management;
- (Intended) teaching staff;
- Students from the institution;
- Representatives from the professional field.

At least one interview takes the form of a dialogue between the panel and students from the new programme (if present) or from a related programme at the institution.

Considering that the panel may request additional information in the course of the dialogue, the programme features an open timeslot. This also enables the programme (institution) to submit additional documentation to the panel or to schedule additional interviews.

If, during the assessment process, matters arise that could affect 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 panel's investigation is structured by reference to the four coherent questions from 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 discusses the panel's findings must allow the reader to answer the questions.

During the dialogue with the programme (institution) and the preceding meeting of the panel, the secretary collects all 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. The final judgement on the two-point scale "sufficient" or "insufficient" is substantiated by reference to the positive and critical elements from the investigation it conducted into 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 advice of the panel. The following data are included in the assessment report:

- The administrative data of the institution and the programme as set out under 4.1;
- The composition of the panel;
- The programme for the dialogue with the programme (institution);
- An overview of the material studied;
- A list of abbreviations.

The draft assessment report is shared with the panel members within four weeks after the site visit has been completed. The process coordinator assesses the internal consistency of the report and the traceability of the advice and, if necessary, proposes adjustments to the panel that clarify the findings or strengthen the substantiation of the advice. After all panel members have approved the contents of the assessment report, the chair of the panel endorses the report for the first time.

The report is then forwarded to the institution. The board of the institution is given 15 calendar days to point out factual inaccuracies and formulate technical remarks. Where necessary, the report is adjusted, after which the panel definitively endorses the assessment report. The panel is obliged to respond in writing to the board of the institution regarding any substantive factual inaccuracies that have been identified. The endorsed assessment report is submitted to NVAO.

3.10 NVAO initial accreditation decision

NVAO will take an initial accreditation decision within an indicative period of eight months following receipt of the application and will forward a draft initial accreditation decision and the underlying assessment report from the panel to the board of the institution before that indicative period expires. When drawing up the draft decision, NVAO may ask the institution and/or the panel for additional information, explanations and clarifications. NVAO can take two possible decisions: positive or negative. NVAO may deviate from the advice contained in the assessment report in its decision, stating its reasons for doing so. All of this takes place in accordance with the provisions laid down in the Regulations on Administrative Principles applicable to decision-making by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders.

Before definitively endorsing the initial accreditation decision, NVAO gives the board of the institution the opportunity, within a limitation period of 15 calendar days starting on the day after receipt, either to formulate comments and/or objections to the draft initial accreditation decision and/or the underlying assessment report, or to withdraw the application.

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

Where necessary, the drafts are adjusted. NVAO forwards its definitive initial accreditation decision with the underlying assessment report from the panel to the institution and to the Flemish Minister

responsible for education. The Flemish Government takes the final decision on the registration of the institution and the recognition of the new programme, within an indicative period of 30 calendar days starting on the day after receipt of the definitive initial accreditation decision. The decision of the Flemish Government enters into force from the moment at which it is notified to the institution.

The new recognised programme is deemed to be accredited until the end of the second academic year following the academic year in which the study load determined for the new programme has been completed in full for the first time.

3.11 Internal and external appeals

Any draft decision or decision taken by NVAO is open to an internal appeal to NVAO and an external appeal to the Council of State, in accordance with NVAO's Regulations on Administrative Principles. NVAO provides the necessary information for this purpose on its website.

3.12 Publication

After the decision-making procedure, NVAO publishes the decision and the underlying assessment report on its website, in the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR), 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. The documents serve to substantiate and verify the information in the file.

Other material 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:

- name;
- address, website;
- name, position, telephone number and email address of the liaison.

Administrative data regarding the programme:

- the degree and the qualification of the degree and, where applicable, the specification of the degree;
- where applicable, the title that holders of the degree conferred by this programme may use;
- the field of study, part of a field of study or fields of study within which the programme is categorised;
- any majors or specialisations;
- the listing of any programme routes for working students, full-time/part-time routes, day/evening education and different forms of certification;
- the location(s) at which the programme is offered;
- the language of instruction;
- the study load expressed in credits;
- the programme-specific learning outcomes;
- in the case of an associate degree or bachelor's programme: the connecting options and possible further programmes; in the case 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:

- If available, the domain-specific learning outcomes;
- the corresponding programme(s) in Flemish higher education or, if they do not exist, the corresponding programme name in neighbouring countries;
- A schematic overview of the entire curriculum;
- A description of the content of all programme components of the first 60 credits, stating the intended learning outcomes, teaching/learning formats, assessment formats, study material and number of credits (ECTS sheets);
- A description of the staff: documents that provide insight into the required competencies of the profiles already present and those intended;
- Overview of contacts with the professional field;
- The investment plan for the entire programme.

If the application is submitted by a foreign institution, the institution also demonstrates that it is already recognised by the competent authority in the country where its headquarters are located.

4.3 Documents available digitally for the panel's investigation

For preparation of the dialogue with the programme

- Educational vision and policy;
- Assessment policy, staff professionalisation (including HR policy if available) and student counselling;
- Teaching and examination regulations;
- Reports of consultations in relevant committees/bodies;
- Overview of the provisions, facilities and services.

During the dialogue with the programme

1. Available manuals and study material.

During its investigation, the panel may always request additional information in order to come to a judgement. The panel must always justify such a request. The list of information studied is included in the assessment report.

Colophon

QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM FLANDERS 2025-2031
Assessment framework comprehensive initial accreditation
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