

External review of the Netherlands Quality Agency (NQA) by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)

Annex I: TERMS OF REFERENCE

June 2017

1. Background and Context

Netherlands Quality Agency (NQA) is a quality assurance agency based in Utrecht, in the centre of the Netherlands. NQA focuses on providing services to (mainly) institutions of higher professional education. As a(n) (external) quality assurance agency, NQA particularly organizes and co-ordinates assessments of degree programmes on the basis of the formal accreditation framework that has been established by the relevant authorities, the Ministry of Education, Culture & Science and the Netherlands-Flemish Accreditation Organization (NVAO).

NQA originates from the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Science (in Dutch: 'Vereniging Hogescholen'). In accordance with the amended Act on Higher Education and Scientific Research (2002), assessments of (existing) degree programmes were to be conducted by independent quality assurance agencies. Subsequently, NQA was formally founded December 2003. Since the foundation NQA has performed over 800 assessments of degree programmes (associate degree, bachelor, master) of (mainly) institutions of higher professional education. The results of these assessments are laid down in a report that institutions/educational programmes use to get re-accredited by NVAO.

Assessments are the solid key objective of the activities of NQA. In addition, the company offers a variety of consultancy and training services. Clients of these services are mainly institutions of higher professional education, although also some other (educational) institutions use these services of NQA.

This (first time) application of NQA for the ENQA membership and registration on EQAR focuses on the assessment (audit/evaluation) activities. A thorough (ENQA) review of this cannot be done without a proper view of the Dutch system of higher education and the system of external quality control. An extensive description will be part of the NQA self-assessment report (SAR). In the meantime, we would like to refer to a description by EP Nuffic that gives an introduction to these two elements:

Higher education in the Netherlands

Higher education in the Netherlands is offered at two types of institutions: research universities and universities of applied sciences. Research universities include general universities, universities specialising in engineering and agriculture, and the Open University. Universities of applied sciences include general institutions as well as institutions specialising in a specific field such as agriculture, fine and performing arts or teacher training. Whereas research universities are primarily responsible for offering research-oriented programmes, universities of applied sciences are primarily responsible for offering programmes of higher professional education, which prepare students for specific professions. These tend to be more practice oriented than programmes offered by research universities.

In this binary, three-cycle system, bachelor's, master's and PhD degrees are awarded. Short-cycle higher education leading to the associate's degree is offered by universities of applied sciences. Degree programmes and periods of study are quantified in terms of the ECTS credit system.

System of external quality assurance

A guaranteed standard of higher education, and alignment with the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area, is maintained through a system of legal regulation and quality assurance, in the form of accreditation. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science is responsible for legislation pertaining to education. The agriculture and public health ministries play an important role in monitoring the content of study programmes in their respective fields. Quality assurance is carried out through a system of accreditation, administered by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO). According to the Dutch Higher Education Act, all degree programmes offered by research universities and universities of applied sciences must be evaluated according to established criteria. Programmes that meet the criteria are accredited: i.e. recognised for a period of six years. Only accredited programmes are eligible for government funding; students receive financial aid and graduate with a recognised degree only when enrolled in, and after having completed, an accredited degree programme. All accredited programmes are listed in the Central Register of Higher Education Study Programmes (CROHO).

Since January 2011, the Netherlands has a new accreditation system. The process described above still applies, but beginning in 2011, higher education institutions can request the NVAO to conduct an 'institutional quality assessment' to determine the extent to which the institution is capable of guaranteeing the quality of the programmes it offers. Programmes offered by institutions that receive a positive evaluation still have to be accredited, but the accreditation procedure takes less time and is not as extensive. The latest developments in the system of accreditation will be effective by the end of 2017. The SAR of NQA will describe these newest adjustments.

2. Purpose and Scope of the Evaluation

This review, will evaluate the way in which and to what extent NQA fulfils the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*. Consequently, the review will provide information to the ENQA Board to aid its consideration of whether membership of NQA should be granted and to EQAR to support NQA application to the register.

The review panel is not expected, however, to make any judgements as regards granting membership.

2.1 Activities of NQA within the scope of the ESG

In order for NQA to apply for ENQA membership and for registration in EQAR, this review will analyse all activities of NQA that are within the scope of the ESG, i.e. reviews, audits, evaluations or accreditation of higher education institutions or programmes that relate to teaching and learning (and their relevant links to research and innovation). This is regardless of whether these activities are carried out within or outside the EHEA, and whether they are obligatory or voluntary.

The following activities of NQA have to be addressed in the external review:

1. The assessments of degree programmes, including cluster audit visits and meta-analysis;
2. NQA hallmark for study programmes;
3. International assessments;

4. Certification internal audit processes;
5. EVC procedures, as far as qualifications at the higher education levels of the national qualifications framework (NQF) are concerned.

The NQA's self-assessment report and the external review report should also address the way in which NQA separates between consultancy and quality assurance, in particular in relation to the activity *support in applying for accreditation*.

3. The Review Process

The process is designed in the light of the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* and in line with the requirements of the *EQAR Procedures for Applications*.

The evaluation procedure consists of the following steps:

- Formulation of the Terms of Reference and protocol for the review;
- Nomination and appointment of the review panel;
- Self-assessment by NQA including the preparation of a self-assessment report;
- A site visit by the review panel to NQA;
- Preparation and completion of the final evaluation report by the review panel;
- Scrutiny of the final evaluation report by the ENQA Review Committee;
- Analysis of the scrutiny by the ENQA Board and their decision regarding ENQA membership;
- Follow-up of the panel's and/or ENQA Board's recommendations by the agency, including a voluntary follow-up visit.

3.1 Nomination and appointment of the review team members

The review panel consists of four members: one or two quality assurance experts, an academic employed by a higher education institution, student member, and eventually a labour market representative (if requested). One of the members will serve as the chair of the review panel, and another member as a review secretary. Two of the reviewers are nominated by the ENQA Board on the basis of proposals submitted to ENQA by the member national agencies. The third external reviewer is drawn from a nomination provided by the European University Association (EUA) or the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE). The nomination of the student member comes from the European Students' Union (ESU).

In addition to the four members, the panel will be supported by the ENQA Secretariat review coordinator who will monitor the integrity of the process and ensure that ENQA expectations are met throughout the process. The ENQA staff member will not be the Secretary of the review and will not participate in the discussions during the site visit interviews.

Current members of the ENQA Board are not eligible to serve as reviewers.

ENQA will provide NQA with the list of suggested experts with their respective curriculum vitae to establish that there are no known conflicts of interest. The experts will have to sign a non-conflict of interest statement as regards NQA review.

3.2 Self-assessment by NQA, including the preparation of a self-assessment report

NQA is responsible for the execution and organisation of its own self-assessment process and shall take into account the following guidance:

- Self-assessment is organised as a project with a clearly defined schedule and includes all relevant internal and external stakeholders;
- The self-assessment report is broken down by the topics of the evaluation and is expected to contain, among others: a brief description of the national HE and QA system; background description of the current situation of the Agency; an analysis and appraisal of the current situation; proposals for improvement and measures already planned; a SWOT analysis; each criterion (ESG part II and III) addressed individually. All agency's QA activities (whether within their national jurisdiction or outside of it, and whether obligatory or voluntary) will be described and their compliance with the ESG analysed.
- The report is well-structured, concise and comprehensively prepared. It clearly demonstrates the extent to which NQA fulfils its tasks of external quality assurance and meets the ESG and thus the requirements of ENQA membership.
- The self-assessment report is submitted to the ENQA Secretariat who has 4 weeks to pre-scrutinise it before forwarding the report to the panel of experts. The purpose of the pre-scrutiny is to ensure that the self-assessment report is satisfactory for the consideration of the panel. The Secretariat will not judge the content of information itself but whether the necessary information, as stated in the Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews, is present. For the second and subsequent reviews, the agency is expected to enlist the recommendations provided in the previous review and to outline actions taken to meet these recommendations. In case the self-assessment report does not contain the necessary information and fails to respect the requested form and content, the ENQA Secretariat reserves the right to reject the report and ask for a revised version within 4 weeks. In such cases, an additional fee of 1000 € will be charged to the agency.
- The report is submitted to the review panel a minimum of six weeks prior to the site visit.

3.3 A Site Visit by the Review Panel

NQA will draw up a draft proposal of the schedule for the site visit to be submitted to the review panel at least two months before the planned dates of the visit. The schedule includes an indicative timetable of the meetings and other exercises to be undertaken by the review panel during the site visit, the duration of which is 2,5 days. The approved schedule shall be given to NQA at least one month before the site visit, in order to properly organise the requested interviews.

The review panel will be assisted by NQA in arriving in Utrecht, the Netherlands.

The site visit will close with a final de-briefing meeting outlining the panel's overall impressions but not its judgement on the granting or reconfirmation of ENQA membership.

3.4 Preparation and completion of the final evaluation report

On the basis of the review panel's findings, the review secretary will draft the report in consultation with the review panel. The report will take into account the purpose and scope of the evaluation as defined under articles 2 and 2.1. It will also provide a clear rationale for its findings with regards to each ESG. A draft will be first submitted to the ENQA review coordinator who will check the report for consistency, clarity and language and it will be then submitted to NQA within 11 weeks of the site visit for comment on factual accuracy. If NQA chooses to provide a statement in reference to the draft report it will be submitted to the chair of the review panel within two weeks after the receipt of the draft report. Thereafter the review panel will take into account the statement by NQA, finalise the document and submit it to NQA and ENQA.

The report is to be finalised within three months of the site visit and will not exceed 40 pages in length.

When preparing the report, the review panel should also bear in mind the *EQAR Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG*, so as to ensure that the report will contain sufficient information for the Register Committee for application to EQAR.

NQA is also requested to provide a letter addressed to the ENQA Board outlining its motivation applying for membership and the ways in which NQA expects to contribute to the work and objectives of ENQA during its membership. This letter will be discussed along with the final evaluation report.

4. Follow-up Process and Publication of the Report

NQA will consider the expert panel's report and will publish it on its website once the ENQA Board has made its decision. The report will also be published on the ENQA website, regardless of the review outcome and decision by the ENQA Board. NQA commits to preparing a follow-up plan in which it addresses the recommendations of the review panel and to submitting a follow-up report to the ENQA Board. The follow-up report will be published on the ENQA website, in addition to the full review report and the Board's decision.

The follow-up report will be complemented by a small-scale visit to the agency performed by two members of the original panel (whenever possible). This visit will be used to discuss issues, based on the ESG, considered as of particular importance or challenge by NQA. Its purpose is entirely developmental and has no impact on the judgement of membership and/or compliance of the agency with the ESG. Should the agency not wish to take advantage of this opportunity, it may opt out by informing the ENQA Review Coordinator about this.

5. Use of the report

ENQA shall retain ownership of the report. The intellectual property of all works created by the expert panel in connection with the review contract, including specifically any written reports, shall be vested in ENQA.

The review report is used by the Board of ENQA for the purpose of reaching a conclusion on whether NQA has met the ESG and can be thus admitted as a member of ENQA. The report will also be used for registration on EQAR, and is designed so as to serve these two purposes. However, the review report is to be considered final only after being approved by the ENQA Board. Once submitted to NQA and ENQA and until it is approved by the Board the report may not be used or relied upon by NQA, the panel and any third party and may not be disclosed without the prior written consent of ENQA. NQA may use the report at its discretion only after the Board has approved of the report. The approval of the report is independent of the decision on membership.

The Chair of the panel shall remain available to respond to questions of clarification or further information from the EQAR Register Committee provided that the ENQA Secretariat is copied in all such requests.

6. Budget

NQA shall pay the following review related fees:

Fee of the Chair	4,500 EUR
Fee of the Secretary	4,500 EUR
Fee of the 2 other panel members	4,000 EUR (2,000 EUR each)
Fee of 2 panel members for follow-up visit	1,000 EUR (500 EUR each)
Administrative overhead for ENQA Secretariat	7,000 EUR

Experts Training fund	1,400 EUR
Approximate travel and subsistence expenses	6,000 EUR
Travel and subsistence expenses follow-up visit	1,600 EUR

This gives a total indicative cost of 30,000.00 EUR VAT excl. for a review team of 4 members. In the case that the allowance for travel and subsistence expenses is exceeded, NQA will cover any additional costs after the completion of the review. However, the ENQA Secretariat will endeavour to keep the travel and subsistence expenses in the limits of the planned budget, and will refund the difference to NQA if the travel and subsistence expenses go under budget.

The fee of the follow-up visit is included in the overall cost of the review and will not be reimbursed in case the agency does not wish to benefit from it.

In the event of a second site visit required by the Board and aiming at completing the assessment of compliance, and should the agency accept a second visit, an additional fee of 500 EUR per expert, as well as travel and subsistence costs are recoverable from the agency.

7. Indicative Schedule of the Review

Agreement on terms of reference	June 2017
Appointment of review panel members	October/November 2017
Self-assessment completed	September/October 2017
Pre-screening of SER by ENQA coordinator	November 2017
Preparation of site visit schedule and indicative timetable	December 2017
Briefing of review panel members	January 2018
Review panel site visit	February 2018
Draft of evaluation report and submitting it to ENQA coordinator for pre-screening	April 2018
Draft of evaluation report to NQA	May 2018
Statement of NQA to review panel if necessary	May 2018
Submission of final report to ENQA	June 2018
Consideration of the report by ENQA Board and response of NQA	September 2018
Publication of the report	September/October 2018