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THE QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM IN THE NETHERLANDS

NVAO is responsible for the quality assurance of higher education in a region where approximately 171 million people live. There are over 1002 higher education institutions where almost 750.000 students are enrolled. The quality assurance system before the Bologna Declaration (1999) had a focus on programmes and was essentially an external assessment of a programme by an assessment panel of independent peers. After the Bologna Declaration was signed the governments of the Netherlands and Flanders wished to increase the international transparency of its higher education. Furthermore, in the context of the new European bachelor and master qualifications a need arose to benchmark the content and level of these new bachelor and master degrees. The Netherlands and Flanders therefore introduced programme accreditation and made accreditation a precondition for public funding, for the right to award officially recognized qualifications (diplomas) and for allowing government grants and loans to students.

In addition to programme accreditation, institutional audits were introduced in 2011 in the Netherlands. An institutional audit is a periodic, external, and independent assessment of the internal quality assurance in place at an institution of Higher Education. Internal quality assurance comprises both the quality culture and the internal quality assurance system of an institution. The audit serves to verify that the institution's internal quality assurance system, in interconnection with its quality culture, safeguards the realisation of its vision of education. These institutional audits are voluntary but a positive outcome results in more limited programme accreditations, i.e. a significant reduction in criteria that are used for programme accreditations.

In December 2016 new frameworks for these institutional audits and programme accreditations were introduced. This new framework aims to endorse staff and student ownership of the programmes and to reduce the

¹ Consulted 20.08.2019, <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/visualisaties/bevolkingsteller>

² Consulted 20.08.2019, <https://www.vereniginghogescholen.nl/hogescholen> and <https://www.vsnul.nl/NL/>

administrative burden of the accreditation process for programmes and institutions.

In February 2019 another new framework was published. In comparison with the 2016 framework some changes were made e.g. a programme must justify its choice of language and that its teachers must be capable of teaching in such a language. This also applies to programmes that bear a foreign language name. Furthermore, some decision rules have changed and further simplification has been achieved by opting for binary, undifferentiated conclusions. The panels will assess a programme as either (conditionally) positive or negative. Finally, the accreditation of existing programmes is now valid for an indefinite period of time. Nevertheless, the programmes are assessed by an NVAO approved panel of independent experts every six years (peer review). This has also resulted in some changes for the assessment reports. In the reports, the strengths and points of improvement must be specified more clearly for each standard and for the entire programme. The summary in the assessment reports must be written for a broad audience.

The NVAO has also other tasks, such as playing a gatekeepers role in the recognition of new providers of higher education. The NVAO plays a proactive role in higher education issues and policies related to QA. In recent years, in terms of the internationalisation of education, specific attention in the Netherlands has been paid to the language policies pursued by institutions and programmes. The (review) panel is not expected to give its opinion on the desirability or otherwise of a programme's choice for a particular language, but rather to review whether the programme has made a conscious and substantiated choice.

The Netherlands Division has formulated the following spearheads for the years ahead:

- With regard to Transnational Education (TNE) the NVAO has an important advisory role with respect to applications from institutions intending to establish an annexe abroad for a programme already in existence in the Netherlands.
- Joint Programmes: the development and assessment of international Joint Programmes will continue to grow in the years ahead. This will be fostered by the propagation of the European Approach for new and existing programmes, and by the participation in consultative bodies and initiatives;
- Within the context of assessments based on the European Approach, NVAO will, upon request, also conduct assessments of existing programmes involving a Dutch partner.
- Participation in a limited number of international projects (within the context of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) or the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA), or at the EU-level), also with a view to the visibility of NVAO and the updating and expansion of its own expertise.

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QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM – FLANDERS 2019-2025

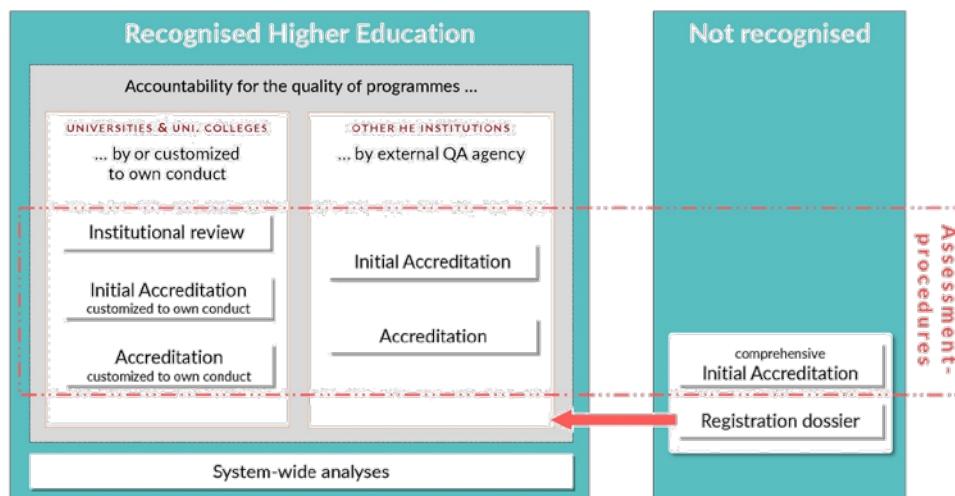
The Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) monitors the quality of higher education in Flanders. In order to substantiate this role, the Department of Flanders of NVAO has designed, in collaboration with all the stakeholders involved, the Flemish quality assurance system – 2019-2025. This system constitutes a well-organised and coherent whole of assessment procedures observed by NVAO. The quality assurance system of Flanders focuses on the quality and accountability of individual programmes. Account is given either through the accreditation of an existing programme or through an institutional review (for universities and university colleges).

Characteristics

Peer review External, independent experts (“peers”) are involved in each of the assessments, either through an assessment panel convened by NVAO (or by another quality assurance agency), or through the institution itself. NVAO sets great store by the involvement of experts from the professional field, educational experts, and students in the assessment of the quality of education.

Public information The information on the quality of programmes is public. NVAO publishes its own assessment reports and decisions both on its own website and on the Higher Education Register.

Appreciative Approach The assessment procedures are based on trust, which vests a large measure of responsibility with the institutions. In order to have this perspective reflected, NVAO has developed its Appreciative Approach. It constitutes a philosophy, a mindset, a style or an attitude that directs the methodology of the procedure and the substantiation of all its components. It does not hinder the formation of judgements; its points of departure are a dialogue, co-creation, and shared insights. In its assessment of the quality, the panel takes the context of the institution or the programme as its starting point. An open dialogue is a key element in the procedure. Special attention is focused on 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 forming a weighted and well-supported conclusion. In line with the above philosophy, it is up to the programme to interpret and further substantiate the assessment frameworks.



Recognised higher education

Universities and university colleges

Responsibility for safeguarding the quality of programmes is vested with the universities and university colleges themselves. They give account of such quality to society by publishing information on the quality of each accredited programme on their website. Institutional reviews coordinated by NVAO assess the manner in which universities and university colleges pursue their educational policy. Under such educational policy, each institution is responsible for assuring the quality of its programmes. This responsibility regarding the assurance of programme quality applies to accredited programmes.

For this reason, each new programme to be launched is subjected to initial accreditation (tailored to the control exerted by the institution), i.e., an assessment by an external panel coordinated by NVAO regarding the potential quality of the programme. Recognition as a new programme is followed by an initial programme accreditation coordinated by NVAO (tailored to the control exerted by the institution): the official conclusion by NVAO that the programme meets the pre-determined minimum requirements regarding quality and level. Following such initial programme accreditation (with a positive result), responsibility for the assurance of the quality of the programme is vested with the universities and university colleges themselves. Should an institutional review show a university's or university college's inability to assure the quality of its accredited programmes, NVAO will take over such assurance. In such cases, quality assurance by NVAO will be effected on a programme-by-programme basis.

Other institutions

All the other recognised higher education institutions give account of the quality of their programmes through the agency of an external quality assessment body. A quality assessment body is a quality assurance agency which is registered on the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) or which has been 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). Each new programme to be launched is subjected to an initial accreditation coordinated by NVAO. Subsequently, it is subjected to programme accreditations at least every six years.

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. Universities and university colleges are required to participate in two such analyses in every six-year cycle, either as an institution or through one or more of their programmes. Other higher education institutions will be invited by NVAO and may participate on a voluntary basis.

Non-recognised higher education

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

International

The international activities, such as projects and assessments, are expected to increase in scope in the years ahead. The fact that Flanders plays a leading role in the Bologna Peer Support Group on Quality Assurance opens up opportunities in the next two years. With respect to international assessments and projects, the Department of Flanders has formulated the following objectives:

- NVAO's Appreciative Approach must win international acceptance in institutional assessments;
- Reviewing the quality of internationalisation (CeQulnt) and the European assessment strategy for joint programmes (European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes);
- Conducting combined institutional and programme assessments in other countries, such as the ones conducted in Luxembourg in 2017 and 2018;
- Development of innovative assessment methods (e.g., for work-based learning and meta-evaluations) in collaboration with European partners;
- Participation in relevant international projects (e.g., focused on the international exchange of quality assurance staff and on the quality assurance of European university networks (EUniQ)).



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THE RESPONSIBILITIES AND STRUCTURE OF THE NVAO

The responsibilities

The Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) is a quality assurance agency that safeguards the quality of higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders, in an expert and independent manner, and that fosters the quality culture pursued within these higher education institutions. NVAO was established in 2005 by treaty between the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Flemish Community of Belgium. The responsibilities of NVAO have been set down in law. Although the governments of the Netherlands and Flanders fund NVAO, the organization is totally independent in procedures, methodologies and decision-making.

The NVAO accredits existing and new programmes, and assesses the quality assurance of higher education institutions. It thus monitors the quality of higher education. The NVAO decisions serve as the basis for the recognition of degrees and titles, and wherever applicable, public funding of programmes. It bases its assessments on the recommendations of recognised experts. The NVAO aims to help ensure that the quality of higher education in Flanders and the Netherlands is recognised as up to par from an international perspective, is acknowledged as socially relevant, and enjoys the trust of students, employers, and society. Within the tasks assigned to the NVAO in the accreditation treaty between the Netherlands and Flanders, it aims to safeguard the quality of higher education, encourage improvements, and promote a quality culture.

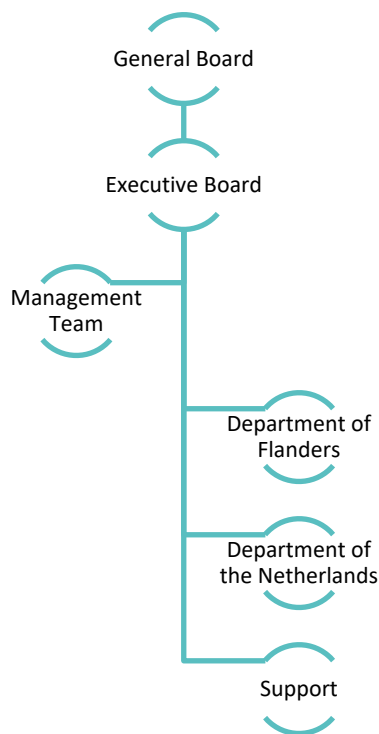
The NVAO is engaged in the design and implementation of changes in the systems of quality assurance in both the Netherlands and Flanders in close cooperation with its stakeholders. Students and other stakeholders in the Netherlands have always favoured programme assessments over institutional accreditation. While trust in the management of quality assurance by institutions increased after the first round of institutional audits, a full institutional accreditation (without self-accrediting powers for the institutions) is still discussed in the current phase of the Dutch system. Moreover, for Dutch government, the NVAO is regarded as being an independent part of administration, playing a mere supervisory role on higher education.

In Flanders, public trust in the quality of higher education has never been as much a matter of debate as it was in the Netherlands. For Flanders, the NVAO is regarded as an independent part of higher education and rather has a supportive role in the enhancement of the quality of higher education. This became evident in 2015 when the Minister of Education asked the NVAO to develop and implement new accreditation frameworks and a pilot round for institutional reviews, in 2015 and 2016. The NVAO coordinated these pilots and played an important role in the evaluation of the new system in 2017, as well as in the development of a new system that became effective in September 2019.

By introducing two independently functioning departments for the Netherlands and Flanders, the structure of the NVAO has been adapted to the differences in foci and quality assurance systems in the Netherlands and Flanders.

From its earliest days, the NVAO has assigned high priority to internationalisation. This follows as a matter of course from both the binary nature of the organisation and the international focus of Dutch and Flemish higher education. The NVAO focuses special attention on the quality assurance of joint programmes, the mutual recognition of programmes and degrees, the dissemination of good practices, commitment to transnational education, collaborative agreements with international accreditation organisations focusing on professional education, the propagation and satisfaction of the European standards and guidelines for quality assurance (ESG), and specific cases such as the recognition of medical programmes by the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG). The Netherlands and Flanders have also each formulated their own international strategies and policies. The NVAO is listed on the European register of quality assurance agencies (EQAR). It also participates in the European network of quality assurance agencies (ENQA) and in the network of European accreditation organisations (ECA). The NVAO sits on the board of ENQA and held the secretariat for ECA. Each of these networks comprise working groups focusing on topics such as joint programmes, CeQulnt, e-learning, communication, and innovation in quality assurance, in which the NVAO staff are participating. The NVAO is also a member of the worldwide network of quality assurance agencies INQA/AHE.

Structure of the agency



The General Board of the NVAO addresses the strategic policy pursued by the organisation, the development of quality assurance systems in the Netherlands and Flanders along with the ensuing assessment frameworks, reports on the assessment of clusters of institutions or programmes, the adoption of the budget and the annual accounts, appeals, and recommendations to the Education Ministers. The Dutch and Flemish members of the NVAO Board are expert in the fields of higher education, the professional practice of higher education, scientific or academic research, or quality assurance. The NVAO Board 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 General Board has mandated the Executive Board to decide on specific applications. The Chair and a maximum of four other NVAO General Board Members constitute the NVAO Executive Board.

The Management Team is tasked with the day-to-day management of the NVAO office and is made of by the Director of the Flanders Division, the Director of the Netherlands Division, the Financial Controller and the Head of the Netherlands Department.

The NVAO team consists of three departments – Flanders, the Netherlands, support - consisting of employees with a passion for higher education. Together they ensure that the quality of higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders is guaranteed. The support department has a various number of supporting tasks.

Main activities

The NVAO activities include drafting frameworks, producing thematic analyses and advising the Ministers of Education in The Netherlands and Flanders regarding quality assurance in higher education. The NVAO carries out the following external quality assurance activities in the scope of the ESG:

- Programme accreditation in Flanders, the Netherlands and the so called “Caribbean Netherlands”;
- initial (programme) accreditation in Flanders and the Netherlands;
- accreditation of joint programmes;
- institutional audits/reviews in the Netherlands and Flanders;
- programme assessment in other jurisdictions, e.g. in Aruba, Curaçao, Luxembourg;
- assessments of special (quality) features for programmes and institutions in the Netherlands and Flanders.