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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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QANU(Quality Assurance Netherlands Universities)

As an independent quality assurance agency, QANU organizes and supports the assessment of degree and research programmes in higher education since 2003, and also provides advice and training in quality assurance. QANU is commissioned mostly by universities in the Netherlands. It organizes and co-ordinates on the basis of formal frameworks about 250 assessments of degree programmes and about 50 research programmes per year. It thus contributes to maintaining and further improving the quality of scientific education and research and has, on the basis of its experience and expertise, a role and position of its own in the system of external quality assurance in the Netherlands. QANU is a full member of [ENQA](#) and is the only Dutch evaluation bureau to be included in [EQAR](#), the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education. In the future, QANU also wants to develop more international activities in the field of quality assurance.

1. Assessments of degree programmes in higher education

In 2002, the Dutch Act on Higher Education and Scientific Research was amended to include accreditation. In the Act, accreditation is described as a quality mark which expresses that the quality of a degree programme has been assessed positively. The amendment of the Act led to the establishment of the NVAO (the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation), which received the legal power to award accreditation to programmes. The NVAO is, among other things, responsible for the development of assessment frameworks that serve as the starting point for assessments in the Netherlands and Flanders.

The Dutch system of external quality assurance can be characterized as a two-tier system. The NVAO decides whether an existing degree programme is re-accredited, but it does not assess existing degree programmes itself. The assessments are, at the request of institutions of higher education, conducted by quality assurance agencies such as QANU.

The external quality assurance system was revised several times since 2002, following amendments of the Act on Higher Education and Scientific Research. The most important change, incurred by the first revision in 2011, was the introduction of the institutional quality assurance assessment. If an institution applies for and passes this assessment, its degree programmes are assessed on the basis of a framework for limited programme assessments. If an institution fails or does not apply for an institutional assessment, its programmes are assessed on the basis of a framework for extensive programme assessments. QANU conducts both limited and extensive programme assessments and within these e.g. multiple degree and joint degree programmes, programmes with special features.



Since 2011, institutions of higher education are no longer obliged to involve a quality assurance agency for the assessments of their degree programmes. In practice, most institutions still commission quality assurance agencies to conduct the assessments of their degree programmes, although some Universities of Applied Sciences are conducting the assessments themselves.

In 2015, another amendment of the Act on Higher Education and Scientific Research led to a revised version of the NVAO's frameworks for assessments of existing degree programmes. The most important changes were the introduction of assessment groups and the division of a single standard on assessment and acquired learning outcomes into two separate standards, one concerning (the system of) assessment, the other concerning acquired learning outcomes. In addition the frameworks underwent other revisions to reduce the perceived administrative burden.

On 21 February 2017, the Minister of Education sent a proposal to conduct a pilot with institutional accreditation and a lighter accreditation at programme level to Parliament. The core of the proposal is that institutions that are selected to participate in the pilot receive institutional accreditation by law. The programmes participating in the pilot are assessed and accredited in a lighter, more restricted way: the NVAO only assesses standards 1 (intended learning outcomes) and 4 (realised learning outcomes) from the framework for restricted programme assessments. Institutions are themselves responsible for the assessment of standards 2 (learning and teaching environment) and 3 (assessment). By now, the pilot has started, with three participating institutions, all of them Universities of Applied Sciences. The pilot runs until 2024. It seems very likely that the Netherlands, following Flanders, will switch to institutional accreditation in the future.

2. Assessments of research units

The starting point for assessments of research units is a protocol developed by VSNU (the Association of Universities in the Netherlands), KNAW (the Royal Academy of Sciences) and NWO (the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research). This Standard Evaluation Protocol (SEP) has been revised a couple of times since its introduction. The current (fifth) version is valid from 2015 until 2021. At the moment, the evaluation of the current version has started.

The primary aim of assessments based on the SEP is "to reveal and confirm the quality and the relevance of the research to society and to improve these where necessary" (p. 5). The object of assessment is a 'research unit'. A research unit may be a research group, a research institute, a research cluster or all the research carried out within a Faculty. An assessment committee assesses the research unit on three assessment criteria: research quality, relevance to society and viability. In addition to these criteria, an assessment takes at least two further aspects into consideration: PhD training programmes offered by the research unit and research integrity. The committee assesses the first three criteria as 'excellent', 'very good', 'good' or 'unsatisfactory'. It assesses the additional aspects in a qualitative way only.