

External review of the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO)
by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)

Annex I: TERMS OF REFERENCE

September 2016

1. Background and Context

NVAO is the independent and binational accreditation organisation set up by the Dutch and Flemish Parliaments on 1 February 2005, whose primary goal it is to provide an expert and objective judgement of the quality of higher education in Flanders and the Netherlands. Its operations are supervised by the Committee of Ministers of Education of both the Netherlands and Flanders.

NVAO's main activities are related to its legal tasks and include drafting and maintenance of the frameworks for accreditation, deciding on applications for accreditation for existing programmes, coordinating assessments and deciding on initial accreditation and institutional audits or reviews in the Netherlands and Flanders. In addition, NVAO can be asked to advise the ministries of education in both countries regarding specific topics or carry out assessments related to quality assurance.

NVAO operates in two different systems of higher education which have both implemented the Bologna reforms on the basis of shared principles for quality assurance. Compliance to the European Standards and Guidelines has been a cornerstone for the Dutch and Flemish systems of quality assurance since their inception. The systems of quality assurance in both the Netherlands and Flanders enter a third phase of their development, which is characterized by reduction of administrative burden on institutions and increasing their autonomy with regard to quality assurance, while maintaining guarantees for the quality of study programmes. NVAO further maintains a strong international presence in European and global networks for external quality assurance, which enables NVAO to channel back new developments in higher education to institutions in both countries.

NVAO has been a full member of ENQA since 2003. With the review of 2017 NVAO aims to renew its ENQA membership. NVAO has been registered on EQAR since 2008 and aims at renewing its registration in September 2017.

2. Purpose and Scope of the Evaluation

This review will evaluate the way in which and to what extent NVAO 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 NVAO should be reconfirmed and to EQAR to support NVAO application to the register.

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

2.1 Activities of NVAO within the scope of the ESG

In order for NVAO to apply for ENQA membership and for registration in EQAR, this review will analyse all activities of NVAO 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 whether these activities are carried out within or outside the EHEA, and whether they are obligatory or voluntary.

The following activities of NVAO have to be addressed in the external review (self-assessment report and the external review report):

1. Programme accreditation in Flanders, the Netherlands and the so called “Caribbean Netherlands”;
2. Initial programme accreditation in Flanders and the Netherlands;
3. Accreditation of joint programmes;
4. Institutional audits/reviews in the Netherlands and Flanders;
5. Programme assessment in Curaçao, Aruba and St. Maarten;
6. Institutional assessment in Curaçao, Aruba and St. Maarten
7. Assessments of distinctive (quality) features for programmes and institutions in the Netherlands and Flanders.

In addition, while the following activities are separate parts of external quality assurance activities, they may be relevant in relation to a number of the ESG standards as follows, and should thus be addressed appropriately in the self-assessment report and the external review report:

8. Approval of/advising on panels for programme assessments - ESG 2.4;
9. Production of thematic analyses or evaluations on the basis of assessments - ESG 3.4;
10. Drafting and maintaining frameworks for accreditation for programmes and institutions in higher education - ESG 2.2 and ESG 2.3.

NVAO carries out evaluations of various features of programmes, in most cases as part of assessments for (initial) accreditation. These result in either advise to the Dutch or Flemish Minister of Education or an independent decision by NVAO. The ENQA review panel will consider on the basis of NVAO’s self-evaluation report whether these evaluations are part of the regular external quality assurance activities of NVAO or a separate evaluation of study programmes in relation to learning and teaching in higher education, and thus whether they are within the scope of the ESG. The evaluations include:

1. Advising the Minister of Education on applications for combining two or more existing programmes into broad programmes (NL);
2. Advising the Minister of Education on applications for extending (or reducing in Flanders) the formal duration of programmes, including research masters of 120 EC (advise in Flanders, initial accreditation in the Netherlands);
3. Deciding on the changes of names of programmes and degrees (NL);
4. Advising the Minister of Education on allowing additional admission criteria for programmes related to specific educational concepts (NL).

Furthermore, the self-evaluation report and external review report should also address (1) NVAO’s requirements for the recognition of other agencies and (2) how NVAO ensures that the decisions taken on the basis of reviews carried out by other agencies are in line with the ESG, especially in case the agency is not registered on EQAR.

The following issues that were flagged when NVAO's registration in EQAR was last renewed and should be addressed in NVAO's self-evaluation report and in the external review report:

ESG 2.5 – Criteria for outcomes [ESG 2005: standard 2.3]

It should be addressed whether NVAO has clarified (within its own operational documents and without questioning the holistic nature of its judgements) the criteria and decision-making process used in making decisions on the accreditation of existing programmes in the Netherlands, including the way in which it ensures consistency of its decisions based on reviews undertaken by different agencies.

ESG 2.6 – Reporting [ESG 2005: standard 2.5]

Issues related to the readability of its reports for its defined target audience should be addressed.

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 NVAO including the preparation of a self-assessment report;
- A site visit by the review panel to NVAO;
- Preparation of the final evaluation report by the review panel;
- Check of the report for factual accuracy and grave misunderstandings by the agency;
- 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 NVAO 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 NVAO review.

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

NVAO 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 NVAO 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

NVAO 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 NVAO at least one month before the site visit, in order to properly organise the requested interviews.

The review panel will be assisted by NVAO in arriving in Hague, Netherlands.

The site visit will close with an oral presentation and discussion of the major issues of the evaluation between the review panel and NVAO.

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 NVAO for comment on factual accuracy. If NVAO 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 NVAO, finalise the document and submit it to NVAO 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.

NVAO is also requested to provide a letter addressed to the ENQA Board outlining its motivation applying for membership and the ways in which NVAO 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

NVAO 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. NVAO 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 NVAO. 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 NVAO has met the ESG and can be thus admitted/reconfirmed 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 NVAO and ENQA and until it is approved by the Board the report may not be used or relied upon by NVAO, the panel and any third party and may not be disclosed without the prior written consent of ENQA. NVAO 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

NVAO 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, NVAO 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 NVAO 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	By September 2016
Appointment of review panel members	November/December 2016
Self-assessment completed	By 1 st November 2016
Pre-screening of SAR by ENQA coordinator	November 2016
Preparation of site visit schedule and indicative timetable	January/February 2017
Briefing of review panel members	February/March 2017
Review panel site visit	March/early April 2017
Draft of evaluation report and submitting it to ENQA coordinator for pre-screening	May/early June 2017
Draft of evaluation report to NVAO	June 2017
Statement of NVAO to review panel if necessary	June/July 2017
Submission of final report to ENQA	By Mid-August 2017
Consideration of the report by ENQA Board and response to NVAO	September 2017
Publication of the report	September 2017