

# NVAO Strategy 2017 - 2020

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## Introduction

The quality of higher education is vitally important to the Dutch and Flemish communities. Recognition of the quality of higher education and thus of the diplomas conferred – in a national but also an international context – is important to students, educational establishments, the labour market, and society at large.

External quality assurance and accreditation acknowledge such quality and support the higher education institutions in their efforts to make any improvements that are necessary.

NVAO monitors the quality of higher education and is committed to improving the visibility of such quality in society. This results in public information on the quality of higher education. This is the perspective from which NVAO develops its assessment frameworks and procedures.

This document outlines the NVAO strategy for the period 2017-2020. This strategy has been inspired by various developments in the Netherlands and Flanders that NVAO has helped substantiate over recent years. They are, successively, the extensive evaluation of NVAO (2013), the institutional review pilot in Flanders (2014-2015), the further development of the Dutch accreditation system (2015-2016), the NVAO self-evaluation in preparation for an ENQA review (2017), and the pioneering work pertaining to joint degrees and mutual recognition of accreditations. During all these developments, NVAO has maintained intensive communication with the parties involved in order to tie in with their views and expand its support basis. NVAO staff have also weighed in on the NVAO strategy during several strategy days.

The quality assurance in place for Flemish and Dutch higher education is underpinned by the same internationally documented principles. However, differences can be observed in the manner in which these principles are substantiated. The diversity in the development of the two systems is a key point of departure for this strategy.

The first section of this strategy document explains the mission, vision, and approach of NVAO. The second section brings the strategy into focus by indicating the issues on which NVAO is taking concrete action. We will concretise this strategy into annual activity plans, in which the priorities for the given period will be elaborated in more detail.

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## **Mission**

*The Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) is a quality assurance agency that, in an expert and independent manner, provides insight into the quality of higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders, and that promotes the quality culture within the higher education institutions in the Netherlands and Flanders. It decides on the accreditation of existing and new programmes, and assesses the quality assurance in place in higher education institutions. Thus, NVAO monitors quality. The NVAO decisions result in recognition of diplomas and degrees, and where applicable in funding of programmes. NVAO bases its assessment on recommendations by recognised experts.*

The quality of higher education is of vital importance to society. For that reason, NVAO actively involves all stakeholders in the performance of its tasks. Wherever relevant we collaborate, at both the national and international levels, with other organisations involved in the development of higher education.

The higher education institutions bear primary responsibility for the quality of their education. NVAO respects this responsibility and the autonomy of the institutions in all its assessment tasks.

NVAO regards transparent assurance of the quality of higher education as an important social assignment; in addition, we make this quality recognisable and manifest in society. In our knowledge society and knowledge-intensive economy, everyone must be able to rely on the quality of higher education. Prosperity and well-being depend on it. Employers and other stakeholders must be able to rely on graduates fulfilling their expectations. Students must be able to rely on the value of their diplomas.

Higher education operates in an international context with an international attitude. It goes without saying that the same goes for NVAO. We monitor and support the development of the “Bologna process”. In the development of the quality assurance systems, we expressly apply the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*; in addition, we promote the use of these standards.

The guiding principle in external quality assurance is peer review. International recognition of both the robustness of the external quality assurance systems and the quality of higher education is important to the Dutch and Flemish higher education institutions. The international activities of NVAO support this recognition.

**Vision** *NVAO pursues higher education with a quality culture in which individuals and organisations, in a self-evident manner, pursue continuous quality assurance and quality improvement. External assessment of the quality dovetails closely with the quality assurance in place at the educational institutions themselves.*

### **NVAO works on the basis of trust in the quality of higher education**

The Dutch and Flemish higher education sectors have now gained more than ten years of experience in external quality assurance and accreditation. Even before that time, the universities and university colleges had their own programmes assessed by external bodies. Since its establishment, NVAO has developed a proper picture of the quality of higher education. The overall quality of higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders is good, and in many institutions we see well-developed and institutionalised quality assurance. For that reason, the institutions deserve the trust to substantiate and demonstrate quality themselves. Such trust is the foundation on which the institutions can build their own quality culture. NVAO wants to encourage the development of the quality culture on the basis of trust, and gears its assessment process to this aim. In this process, the programme remains the subject of assessment. The extent to which the assessment by NVAO, within the statutory frameworks, shifts towards the institutions may differ between the Netherlands and Flanders. Despite this foundation of trust, NVAO remains critical and strict wherever this is necessary or desirable.

### **NVAO respects the autonomy of the institutions**

The profiling of the institutions and the structure of their education fall under their autonomy and constitute the point of departure for, rather than the subject of, a quality assessment. Institutions respond to politico-social requirements and differ in their approach and design. This entails a high degree of innovation, such as modular education, work-based learning, online and blended education, short study tracks, joint programmes, and joint degrees. NVAO takes these innovations into account in its assessment of the quality of education. In the composition of the panels, we aim to include the expertise required for a professional assessment of these educational innovations.

### **NVAO works in a transparent manner**

NVAO is aware of the import of its judgements. These judgements are decisive for the recognition of diplomas and the admission to recognised and/or publicly funded higher education. This task calls for a high degree of integrity and transparency. We uphold norms and values that foster integrity. Clear assessment frameworks and judgements

provide the institutions with full insight into the approach and implementation of the assessment procedures. We continuously monitor the operation of our frameworks and wherever necessary we clarify their objectives and operation. We communicate openly on our tasks and activities.

### **NVAO reduces the (perceived) administrative burden**

Accreditation is important with a view to social accountability and it goes without saying that it requires an effort on the part of institutions. With its adapted frameworks and working methods, NVAO wants to give the institutions greater autonomy and strengthen the involvement of students and staff. Furthermore, by clear communication, guidance and processes we ensure an efficient commitment of manpower and resources, both within the institutions and within our own organisation.

## Strategy

1. *NVAO regards trust as the basic principle for quality assurance, but takes decisive action wherever necessary. We assume that the quality is up to standard, unless this is demonstrably not the case (yes, unless).*
2. *NVAO fosters the quality culture by respecting the autonomy of institutions. The institutions are responsible for their quality assurance.*
3. *NVAO adopts a tailored approach in the assessment of educational quality and works actively on reducing the administrative burden.*
4. *In the years ahead, NVAO will continue to develop as an expert in the assessment of the quality of higher education.*
5. *NVAO develops its own organisation in line with the development of quality assurance.*
6. *NVAO continues to propagate the quality of Dutch and Flemish higher education at the international level.*

## Strategy

*The quality assurance systems of the Netherlands and Flanders both continue to be developed within the national cultural and political context. In both contexts, trust occupies central stage, but the manner in which this is elaborated in the systems can and may differ. Some such differences are illustrated below.*

**1. NVAO regards trust as the basic principle for quality assurance, but takes decisive action wherever necessary. We assume that the quality is up to standard, unless this is demonstrably not the case (yes, unless).**

Flanders features broad social trust in higher education. NVAO wants to capitalise on this trust in order to further the institutions' ownership of their quality. We are conducting a pilot involving extensive institutional reviews, in which the quality of programmes can also be assessed. Together with the education sector we have developed a methodology that focuses a great deal of attention on the involvement of internal and external stakeholders, peers, and experts in programme-level quality assurance. In addition, a great deal of attention is paid to the manner in which the institution informs its stakeholders and society about the quality of each programme, and to the actions it is taking to reinforce and improve this quality.

In Flanders, NVAO is steering a new course with respect to the assessment of the institutions. To this end, we have developed the *Evaluating Approach*. We have adopted this approach to substantiate the institutional review in terms of content and procedures. This gives the institutions free rein to flesh out their quality, and their quality culture. In consultation with all the stakeholders, Flanders is developing a new quality assurance system based on the evaluation of the pilot referred to above. Under this new system, the institutions are free to choose whether or not they wish to undergo an institutional review. NVAO is in charge of this process and thus supports the transition to a new system. In the new system, the quality assurance of programmes also plays a key role. Among institutions opting for an institution review, only a specific group of programmes will require external assessment: new programmes, first re-accreditations of new programmes, programmes that have been granted an improvement period, and first accreditations of joint programmes.

In the Netherlands, the accreditation framework has been adjusted following extensive consultations with educational establishments, students, quality assessment organisations, and other stakeholders. The new framework is also based on trust, and affords the institution more freedom in structuring the self-evaluation report and the site visit. In addition, NVAO will adopt a more tailored approach in the assessment of the

educational quality of institutions.

If institutions have demonstrated that the quality of their education and their quality assurance are up to standard, NVAO will factor this in when processing accreditation applications for existing programmes provided by such institutions. In such cases, decision-making may be accelerated. A positive institutional audit and predominantly positive programme assessments inspire trust in the institution. Where such trust is lacking, we take decisive action in order to – if necessary – improve the quality and assure the quality for the benefit of all stakeholders.

In collaboration with partner organisations, NVAO is developing a strategy for a risk-oriented approach and theme-based or system-wide analyses. This will enable us to combine individual signals regarding educational quality and map out risks in a targeted manner. In addition, this will enable us to identify cluster- or sector-specific trends that may lead to recommendations or adjustment of the procedures.

## **2. NVAO fosters the quality culture by respecting the autonomy of institutions. The institutions are responsible for their quality assurance.**

NVAO opts for reinforcing the autonomy of the institutions and holding them to account for their ownership of the quality of their education. NVAO has a dual assignment: assuring quality and promoting a quality culture.

In the Netherlands, NVAO is relying more expressly on peer panels in order to connect quality assurance (accountability) and promoting the quality culture (improvement). During an external assessment, a panel of recognised experts visits the institution or programme. The visit is conducted in accordance with the frameworks set down by NVAO. The panels account for the quality of the education provided in an accreditation report to be assessed by NVAO. They reinforce the quality of the education provided by suggesting potential improvements to the institution. The institution incorporates these recommendations into an improvement track, in collaboration with the educational community (participation council, staff, and students).

To this end, NVAO will train and instruct the peers in the points of departure and approach to accreditation and external assessment in accordance with the new framework. In the Netherlands, NVAO aims for a more express distinction in the assessment report between conditions that are essential to assuring educational quality and recommendations for the improvement of such quality.

In Flanders, the institutions are given full responsibility for assuring and improving the quality of programmes.

Under the new quality assurance system, the institutions are intended to take full control over this quality assurance. They may have this control assessed in an institutional review by a panel convened drawn up by NVAO. A positive outcome will result in an extension of the accreditation of the programmes provided by the institution in question. The *Evaluating Approach* has given the Flemish institutions the room to concentrate on developing their policies, and steer their own course in interpreting certain aspects of the quality assurance system.

This has reinforced the ownership within the quality assurance system. For that reason, NVAO will adopt this *Evaluating Approach* as the guiding philosophy in the further development of the quality assurance system in Flanders.

### **3. NVAO adopts a tailored approach in the assessment of educational quality and works actively on reducing the administrative burden.**

In Flanders, NVAO has visited all higher education institutions. Furthermore, the developments of the quality assurance system have been discussed with all the external stakeholders, and the expectations within the education sector have been mapped out. NVAO subsequently organises regular meetings (SAMENaries) to exchange experiences with the institutions and umbrella organisations, and substantiate quality assurance in concrete terms. At the request of and in collaboration with the institutions, NVAO is developing the expertise required for a professional assessment of innovative education, from both the national and international perspectives. In collaboration with the Flemish government and the institutions, NVAO is working on automatic data exchange. The same information will thus only need to be entered once, while all the parties have continual access to up-to-date information. In addition, NVAO places increasing emphasis on public information. This is also intended to relax the preparation of assessments.

In the Netherlands, NVAO has found that the requirements and expectations regarding accreditation give rise to ambiguities, as a result of which institutions sometimes structure the accreditation process in a manner more stringent than intended. NVAO wants to communicate better regarding the expectations and to that end to take a more active stance in contacting institutions, programmes, and quality assessment agencies. We can reduce the administrative burden by removing uncertainties, and preventing ambiguity arising regarding expectations and procedures. For that reason, in the years ahead, we

will devote more time to the training of panel chairs and secretaries. We will intensify information provision regarding the framework, and inform institutions and programmes at an early stage about the changes and options. Regular information also enables us to better gear the assessments to specific aspects of an institution or programme. The NVAO staff, in their capacity of process coordinators, play an important part in this respect. They serve as the liaison between the institution and NVAO, enabling adequate communication and short lines.

NVAO is committed to structural consultation with a range of parties. We organise information meetings for the contact persons of institutions, assessment cluster coordinators, and quality assurance staff. We will continue the consultations with the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences, the Association of Universities in the Netherlands, the Dutch National Students Association, and the National Union of Students. We will enter into a dialogue with quality assessment agencies in order to coordinate optimally the objectives of the framework and the execution of the external assessments. NVAO wants to collaborate with the quality assessment agencies in order to optimise the harmonisation of policy and practice. In the Netherlands, NVAO is setting down new agreements regarding collaboration with the Inspectorate of Education and the Committee for Effective Higher Education (CDHO). NVAO thus contributes to reducing the administrative burden for the institutions. We do so, inter alia, by preventing any overlap in questions, sharing information, and using information already available. Furthermore, we publish the assessment schedule well in advance, thus enabling other parties to plan their studies more efficiently.

Finally, NVAO is entering into collaborative agreements with other national and international profession-specific accreditation organisations with a view to inter-coordination of the accreditation processes. Retaining our own responsibilities and quality requirements, we can mutually adopt judgements and combine processes. This will also help reduce the burden and tailor the approach.

#### **4. In the years ahead, NVAO will continue to develop as an expert in the assessment of the quality of higher education.**

To this end, NVAO will keep abreast of new developments in the field of quality assessment, both within and beyond (higher) education. On the basis of our expertise, we will develop quality assurance for innovative educational concepts or specific educational themes, such as online and blended education, MOOCs, modular education, flexibilisation, and work-based learning.

We foster learning from one another through system-wide analyses, meetings, and participation in international activities and projects. The binational nature of our own organisation serves as a trump card in these efforts. We promote the dissemination of knowledge regarding these topics with stakeholders in the higher education sectors at home and abroad.

NVAO continues to work on innovation by initiating pilots. Furthermore, NVAO carries out system-wide analyses to gain a proper picture of the quality within a specific group of programmes or section of higher education. These analyses are conducted in close consultation with the higher education institutions. In the Netherlands, we also collaborate with the Inspectorate of Education and the Committee for Effective Higher Education (CDHO). In Flanders, we set down the topics together with the institutions, students, and other parties involved.

#### **5. NVAO develops its own organisation in line with the development of quality assurance.**

Within the Treaty between the Netherlands and Flanders, there is a need for differentiation, whilst retaining the binational organisation. This means that we create sufficient room for an individual approach, in both the Netherlands and Flanders. This ties in with the developmental differences of the Netherlands and Flanders, and befits their own administrative and organisational traditions. General points of departure, such as peer reviews and internationalisation, will remain in force for both countries. Individual approaches enable the Netherlands and Flanders to tackle specific tasks as efficiently as possible.

In the years ahead, we will gear the administrative structure and the NVAO office to this differentiation. The Board will focus on strategic lines, the development of frameworks and the quality assurance system, reports on groups of institutions or programmes, setting down the budget and annual accounts, and the processing of appeals.

The authority to decide on concrete applications will be mandated to the Executive Board. Two policy departments will be set up to support the developments in the Netherlands and Flanders, respectively. In the Dutch department, responsibility for processing applications will partially be transferred to the department management.

As a professional organisation, NVAO promotes an organisational culture in which the pursuit of quality constitutes a self-evident component. This is given concrete shape within the NVAO departments, not only through training and courses, but also with peer group sessions and reinforcement of peer reviews. NVAO is committed to expand and

enhance the contacts with institutions, programmes, students, relevant EQAR registered quality assurance organisations, and quality assessment agencies. These contacts provide us with knowledge and feedback, which we can use to further improve our activities.

The binational nature of NVAO is reflected in joint decision-making in the Board and the Executive Board. This nature is also manifest in the substantive similarity of the working methods and the joint activities (such as system-wide analyses and joint projects, both binational and international). Furthermore, the binational nature is reflected in the staffing of the offices in the Netherlands and Flanders; at both locations, Dutch and Flemish staff carry out the assignments together.

## **6. NVAO continues to propagate the quality of Dutch and Flemish higher education at the international level.**

NVAO monitors the international developments in quality assurance, and puts them into practice wherever advisable. We are a pioneer in the field of internationalisation; this is why we aim to take the lead in the quality assurance of joint programmes, the mutual recognition of programmes and diplomas, and the dissemination of good practices. Furthermore, we are involved in transnational education, and we enter into collaborative agreements with international professionally oriented accreditation organisations in order to foster student mobility and reduce the administrative burden for programmes and institutions. In the collaboration with other accreditation organisations, we mainly focus on North-Western Europe.

The *European Standards and Guidelines* (ESG) constitute the framework for the structure of quality assurance in higher education. NVAO propagates these standards and ensures that it explicitly meets them.

NVAO participates in various international organisations and projects. In some cases, only the Dutch or the Flemish department is involved; e.g., the Flemish department in the collaboration with Luxembourg, or the Dutch department for the support of the Caribbean Netherlands. In other cases, the two departments work together, e.g., with respect to the recognition by the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG) for medical programmes, which is important to both Flanders and the Netherlands.

**Colophon**    **NVAO Strategy 2017 - 2020**

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