

Assessment frameworks
for the higher education
accreditation system
*Programme assessment
(limited/extensive)*

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Contents

1	Structure of the system	5
3	Limited programme assessment	7
3.1	Set-up	7
3.2	Assessment framework for limited programme assessments	8
3.3	Composition of the assessment panel	9
3.4	Assessment process	10
3.4.1	<i>Critical reflection</i>	10
3.4.2	<i>Site visit</i>	11
3.4.3	<i>Assessment procedure within the assessment panel</i>	12
3.4.4	<i>Assessment report</i>	12
3.5	NVAO decision-making	12
3.6	Required documents	13
3.6.1	<i>Basic data concerning the programme</i>	13
3.6.2	<i>Required appendices to the critical reflection</i>	13
3.6.3	<i>Documents made available during the visit</i>	14
4	Extensive programme assessment	15
4.1	Set-up	15
4.2	Assessment framework for extensive programme assessments	16
4.3	Composition of the assessment panel	19
4.4	Assessment process	21
4.4.1	<i>Critical reflection</i>	21
4.4.2	<i>Site visit</i>	21
4.4.3	<i>Assessment procedure within the assessment panel</i>	22
4.4.4	<i>Assessment report</i>	22
4.5	NVAO decision-making	22
4.6	Required documents	23
4.6.1	<i>Basic data concerning the programme</i>	23
4.6.2	<i>Required appendices to the critical reflection</i>	23
4.6.3	<i>Documents made available during the visit</i>	24
6	Distinctive features	25
6.1	Background	25
6.2	Criteria for distinctive features	25
7	Assessment scales for programme assessments	27
7.1	Unsatisfactory	27
7.2	Satisfactory	27
7.3	Good	28
7.4	Excellent	28
8	Assessment rules	29
8.1	Programme assessments	29

9	Accreditation Decision under the Higher Education and Research Act	30
9.1	Conditional initial accreditation and institutional quality assurance assessment	30
9.2	Improvement period for accreditation	30
10	Appeals	32

1 Structure of the system

Accreditation takes place at the programme level. Thus, the accreditation system continues to focus on the quality of individual programmes. In addition, institutions may request NVAO to conduct a so-called institutional quality assurance assessment. Should such a thorough audit reveal that an institution's quality assurance is in such good order that the quality of the programmes is systematically improved, wherever necessary, NVAO will then place that institution in a different accreditation regime. The accreditation methods practised under this regime differ from those implemented for programmes without a positive institutional quality assurance assessment. Under this regime, an assessment panel of independent experts assesses each programme on a limited number of standards pertaining to the essence of educational quality. On the basis of this assessment, NVAO decides whether or not to accredit that programme. This leaves the teaching staff free to devote their attention and energy to expert suggestions for improvement relating to the core of their teaching, rather than spending time on pre-conditional aspects that are better dealt with at the institutional level, as the trustworthiness of the institution regarding those themes has already been demonstrated at the institutional level. This is a system in which:

- a. institutional quality assurance assessments bolster an institution-wide internal quality culture;
- b. programme accreditations focus on the essence of the education provided: (improving) substantive quality;
- c. a proper balance is achieved between assessing programmes on the one hand and quality improvement on the other.

The accreditation system comprises six assessment frameworks:

1. an institutional-level framework to be used for "institutional quality assurance assessments"¹, the so-called **institutional quality assurance assessment**;
2. a programme-level framework with "limited assessment criteria for the accreditation of institutions whose institutional quality assurance assessment produced a positive result"², the so-called **limited programme assessment**;
3. a programme-level framework with "extensive assessment criteria for accreditations"³, the so-called **extensive programme assessment** (required if an institutional quality assurance assessment turns out negative and for institutions that have not applied for an institutional quality assurance assessment);
4. a programme-level framework with "limited assessment criteria for the initial accreditation of new programmes provided by institutions whose institutional quality assurance assessment produced a positive result"⁴, the so-called **limited initial accreditation**;
5. a programme-level framework with "extensive assessment criteria for the initial accreditation of new programmes"⁵, the so-called **extensive initial accreditation** (required if an institutional quality assurance assessment turns out negative and for institutions that have not applied for an institutional quality assurance assessment);
6. an assessment framework to determine whether an institution or a programme has any **distinctive features**.⁶

1 Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW), Articles 5a.13a - 13e.

2 Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW), Article 5a.13f.

3 Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW), Article 5a. 8.

4 Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW), Article 5a.13g.

5 Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW), Article 5a. 10a.

6 Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW), Article 5a.10.

The five chapters below present the first five assessment frameworks. The following is successively outlined for each of the assessment frameworks: its set-up, the framework itself, the composition of the audit panel or the assessment panel, the elements of the assessment process, the decisions to be taken by NVAO and the minimum documentation required. Chapter 7 outlines the background and the criteria that apply to the award of a distinctive feature. Chapter 8 defines the assessment scales that apply to (extensive and limited) programme assessments and presents examples for the operationalisation of said scales. Chapter 9 encompasses the assessment rules.

The document at hand concludes by outlining the appeal procedures.

Justification

The frameworks have been formulated on the basis of the European guidelines for the internal quality assurance of higher education institutions. These guidelines are presented in Chapter 2 of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* ('European Standards and Guidelines'; ESG) of the European network for quality assurance agencies, the European Association for Quality Assurance (ENQA). In 2005, this document was adopted by the education ministers during their meeting in Bergen. NVAO has established that the requirements with regard to institutional quality assurance assessment, set by the Minister of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) in his memorandum *Focus op quality* [Focus on Quality], are in excellent alignment with the ESG.⁷ NVAO has translated and rearranged the ESG in order to shift the focus from quality assurance to quality enhancement.

⁷ Dutch Lower Chamber, meeting year 2007–2008, 31 288 and 28 879, no. 21. Cf. *Het Hoogste Goed, Strategische agenda voor het hoger onderwijs-, onderzoeks- en wetenschapsbeleid* [The Greatest Good, strategic agenda for higher education, research and science policy], Parliamentary Document 2007-2008, 31288, no. 1.

3 Limited programme assessment

3.1 Set-up

The framework for limited assessments of existing programmes is used for institutions that have obtained a positive judgement following an institutional quality assurance assessment. The assessment is based on a discussion with peers regarding the content and quality of the programme. It focuses on three questions:

1. What is the programme aiming for?
2. How is the programme realising this aim?
3. Is the programme achieving its objectives?

These three questions have been translated into three standards. Regarding each of these three standards, an assessment panel gives a substantiated judgement on a four-point scale: unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good or excellent. The panel subsequently gives a substantiated final conclusion regarding the overall quality of the programme, on the same four-point scale.

3.2 Assessment framework for limited programme assessments

Intended learning outcomes

Standard 1: *The intended learning outcomes of the programme have been concretised with regard to content, level and orientation; they meet international requirements.*

Explanation: As for level and orientation (bachelor's or master's; professional or academic), the intended learning outcomes fit into the Dutch qualifications framework. In addition, they tie in with the international perspective of the requirements currently set by the professional field and the discipline with regard to the contents of the programme.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Teaching-learning environment

Standard 2: *The curriculum, staff and programme-specific services and facilities enable the incoming students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.*

Explanation: The contents and structure of the curriculum enable the students admitted to achieve the intended learning outcomes. The quality of the staff and of the programme-specific services and facilities is essential to that end. Curriculum, staff, services and facilities constitute a coherent teaching-learning environment for the students.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Assessment and achieved learning outcomes

Standard 3: *The programme has an adequate assessment system in place and demonstrates that the intended learning outcomes are achieved.*

Explanation: The level achieved is demonstrated by interim and final tests, final projects and the performance of graduates in actual practice or in post-graduate programmes. The tests and assessments are valid, reliable and transparent to the students.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

General conclusion

The quality of the programme is

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

The assessment is based on the following definitions. These definitions relate to both the scores obtained for the individual standards and the overall scores awarded to the programme.

Generic quality

The quality that can reasonably be expected in an international perspective from a higher education bachelor's or master's programme.

Unsatisfactory

The programme does not meet the current generic quality standards and shows serious shortcomings in several areas.

Satisfactory

The programme meets the current generic quality standards and shows an acceptable level across its entire spectrum.

Good

The programme systematically surpasses the current generic quality standards across its entire spectrum.

Excellent

The programme systematically well surpasses the current generic quality standards across its entire spectrum and is regarded as an (inter)national example.

Chapter 8 presents examples for the operationalisation of these assessments.

3.3 Composition of the assessment panel⁸

It is imperative that assessment panels are composed in a manner allowing meaningful discussions among peers, in which the panel remains sufficiently independent. The institution convenes the panel, appoints a secretary and subsequently presents the panel to NVAO for approval. To that end the institution provides data on the expertise and independence of the panel members and the secretary, in a manner stipulated by NVAO. The institution may also commission an external quality assessment agency to convene a panel; in such cases the panel must also be presented to NVAO for approval.

The panel secretary has completed NVAO training leading to certification. Every year, NVAO publishes a list of NVAO certified secretaries.

Assessment panels must meet the following requirements.

1. The panel is composed of a minimum of four members, among whom at least two authoritative domain experts⁹ and a student.
2. Overall, the panel commands the following expertise:
 - a. expertise regarding developments in the discipline,
 - b. international expertise,

⁸ This paragraph is explained in detail in the guideline titled *Eisen aan de panelsamenstelling* [Requirements for the composition of panels]. This guideline contains detailed requirements to be met by panels. It also contains a submission procedure, a form to be filled out by the institution and a code of conduct for panel members.

⁹ Domain expertise is understood to mean specialist expertise, international expertise or professional expertise.

- c. practical expertise in the professional field relevant to the programme (if applicable),
 - d. experience in teaching and educational development at the relevant programme level and expertise regarding the teaching format(s) used in the programme¹⁰,
 - e. student-related expertise,
 - f. assessment or audit expertise.
3. The panel is independent (its members have not had any ties with the institution providing the programme for at least the past five years).
 4. The panel is assisted by an independent, external secretary trained and certified by NVAO. The secretary does not sit on the panel.

Prior to the visit, all panel members and the secretary certify to not maintaining any connections or ties with the institution in question, either as a private individual or as a researcher / teacher, professional or adviser, which could affect an independent judgement of the quality of the programme in either a positive or a negative sense, and to not having had such connections or ties with the institution during the past five years.

In addition to the factual independence, as expressed above in the nature of the relationship and the number of years, it is essential for any panel member or secretary to feel independent.

Panel members and secretaries will sign a declaration of independence and confidentiality prior to the assessment process. In this declaration, they attest to having taken note of the code of conduct. Following the assessment process, the chair and secretary sign the assessment report once all panel members have read and approved the report. The report includes a declaration that the assessment has been carried out independently.

Stakeholders such as panel members, staff or students may report to NVAO any matters arising during the assessment process that could affect the independence of the assessment or pertain to other complaints regarding the panels or secretaries.

3.4 Assessment process

3.4.1 Critical reflection

For the purpose of the assessment by the assessment panel, the programme presents a critical reflection of the programme. The critical reflection should follow the standards outlined for the limited programme assessment framework and describes the programme's strengths and weaknesses. In its critical reflection, the programme outlines how it checks student and staff satisfaction and reports on the results. Underpinning documents are made available for the panel to inspect. In addition, the report indicates which measures for improvement have been taken following the previous assessment. The critical reflection is a self-contained document that can be read separately.

¹⁰ This includes, for example, distance learning, work-related courses, flexible education, skill-oriented education or education aimed at excellent students.

The assessment framework for limited programme assessments is structured in a manner allowing programmes ample scope to emphasise their unique character. The programme may use that scope in the critical reflection. The critical reflection is the pre-eminent tool to allow teachers and peers to comment on the contents of the programme. Therefore it must be a document in which teachers and students recognise the programme.

In addition, the assessment framework offers opportunities to discuss the ambitions of the programme during the site visit, rather than focus on the results obtained in the past. What choices will the programme make for the future, what direction will it take? In order to conduct such discussions, the assessment panel is expected to be able to reflect on the programme's plans for the future, together with the programme's representatives.

It is imperative that any overlap with assessments within the context of the institutional quality assurance assessment is avoided when drawing up the critical reflection and during the assessment procedure. Should any reference to institutional policy or, for example, departmental policy be necessary, programme assessments strictly focus on the fitness for purpose of the policy pursued regarding the programme in question. This does not include pre-conditional matters, such as the structure of quality assurance or the institution's staff policy; these are considered in institutional quality assurance assessments.

The critical reflection comprises a maximum of 25 pages, excluding appendices.

3.4.2 *Site visit*

In principle, the required site visit for the purpose of a limited programme assessment takes one day. In the event of a collective assessment of comparable programmes within a single institution, the duration may be reduced proportionally.

Prior to the visit, the assessment panel has studied a number of final projects in order to gain insight into the exit level attained in the programme. To that end, a selection is made from a comprehensive overview drawn up by the programme. The final projects, the relevant assessment criteria and the requirements are forwarded to the panel members prior to the visit, or the panel members examine the documents on site prior to the visit. Prior to the visit, the panel members form a preliminary opinion about the programme and draw up questions for their site visit. The panel factors the outcomes of the institutional quality assurance assessment into its judgement.

During the site visit, the assessment panel will, in any case, meet with the programme management, members of the examining board and the programme committee, teachers, students, alumni and wherever relevant representatives of the professional field. In addition, the panel examines the material made available by the programme. The panel determines the exact scope of the discussions, the possible clustering of discussion participants and the further organisation of the visit. The panel decides at its own discretion which teachers and students it would like to see and which documents it would like to examine. In principle, the programme delegations comprise no more than six persons. The panel will set aside time for open consultations. The programme and the panel will make these open consultations widely known, both prior to and during the visit. In addition, the panel may visit lectures or other teaching-learning situations, such in consultation with the programme.

At the end of the site visit, the chair of the assessment panel provides brief feedback information to the programme regarding the general judgement and the underlying considerations.

3.4.3 *Assessment procedure within the assessment panel*

The assessment panel presents its judgement regarding all the standards incorporated in the assessment framework. This judgement is substantiated by an appraisal of the positive and critical elements from the panel's findings. The judgement may be: unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good or excellent. The panel subsequently formulates a general, weighted and substantiated judgement regarding the quality of the programme. This judgement is also given on a four-point scale, ranging from unsatisfactory to excellent.

3.4.4 *Assessment report*

The assessment panel secretary draws up an assessment report comprising some 20 pages. The main content of the report features the panel's judgements regarding the standards. It is important for the audit panel to include underpinnings based on the programme's critical reflection, the meetings with representatives of the programme and the underlying data from the documents made available. The report will include significant and representative examples. In its report, the panel gives an account of the manner in which it has organised its visit and how it has arrived at its choice of discussion partners and documents.

The assessment report is preceded by a summary judgement regarding the quality of the programme comprising a maximum of two pages. Any measures for improvement will be presented in a separate paragraph. In addition, the report contains a score table with the panel judgements, information on the date(s) of the site visit, the names of the discussion partners, basic data concerning the programme (see paragraph 3.6), an overview of the material studied and the declarations of independence signed by the panel members and the secretary.

The assessment panel secretary forwards the advisory report to the board of the institution once all panel members have approved its contents. The institution is given the opportunity to respond to any factual inaccuracies in the report, whereupon the panel chair endorses the report after all panel members have taken note of and approved its contents. The report is signed by the chair and the secretary of the panel.

3.5 **NVAO decision-making**

The board of the institution applies to NVAO for accreditation based on the assessment report. NVAO may decide to accredit the programme, not accredit it or grant an improvement period. The Accreditation Decree of the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act stipulates how, on what grounds and under what circumstances NVAO may grant an improvement period.

Because of the limited nature of the assessment, NVAO exercises more reticence in reviewing the assessment report than it does with extensive programme assessments. The positive assessment of the institution inspires sufficient confidence that the quality assurance regarding the quality of the education provided by the institution is effectively guaranteed. In addition, its prior approval of the assessment panels and the fact that these

panels' secretaries have been trained and certified provides sufficient context and certainty to resort to a more reticent review of the assessment report. The review focuses on the completeness and validity of the assessment report.

3.6 Required documents

During the assessment process, the programme provides the assessment panel with a limited number of documents. NVAO assumes that these are existing documents, available within the institution, rather than documents prepared especially for the programme assessment. The documents serve as a substantiation and if need be as verification. Other material is only required when explicitly requested by the panel or if the programme wishes to demonstrate a particular distinctive feature.

3.6.1 *Basic data concerning the programme*

(The basic data is incorporated into the critical reflection, the assessment report and the NVAO decision.)

Administrative data regarding the programme

1. Nomenclature of the programme in CROHO [central register of higher education programmes];
2. Orientation and level of the programme;
3. Number of credits;
4. Specialisations;
5. Location(s);
6. Mode (s) of study;
7. CROHO registration number.

Administrative data regarding the institution

1. Name of the institution;
2. Status of the institution (publicly funded or legal body providing higher education);
3. Outcome of the institutional quality assurance assessment.

Quantitative data regarding the programme

1. Data on intake, transfers and graduates pertaining to – if possible – the last six cohorts;
2. Teacher -student ratio achieved;
3. Average amount of face-to-face instruction per stage of the study programme (a stage can be expressed in, for example, regular years of study, the work placement and the graduation period).

3.6.2 *Required appendices to the critical reflection*

(The list of appendices studied will be incorporated into the assessment report.)

1. Subject-specific reference framework and the learning outcomes of the programme;
2. Overview of the curriculum in diagram form;
3. Outline description of the curriculum components, stating learning outcomes, attainment targets, teaching method(s), assessment method, literature (mandatory/recommended), teacher and credits;
4. Teaching and examination regulations;

(Items 2 to 4 are usually reflected in a study guide, in which case this can be annexed to the report.)

5. Overview of allocated staff with names, positions, scope of appointment, level and expertise;
6. List of the last 25 final projects or the final projects of the past two years (or portfolios / projects demonstrating the exit levels attained by the students);
7. Overview of the contacts maintained with the professional field (if relevant);
8. Report on the institutional quality assurance assessment.

3.6.3 Documents made available during the visit

(The list of material studied will be incorporated into the assessment report.)

1. Reports on consultations in relevant committees / bodies;
2. Test questions with corresponding assessment criteria and requirements (answer models) and a representative selection of actual tests administered (such as presentations, work placements, portfolio assessments) and assessments;
3. Representative selection of final projects, selected by the panel, of the past two years with corresponding assessment criteria and requirements;
4. Reference books and other learning materials;
5. Summary and analysis of recent evaluation results and relevant management information;
6. Documentation regarding teacher and student satisfaction.

4 Extensive programme assessment

4.1 Set-up

The framework for extensive assessments of existing programmes is used for institutions that have failed to obtain a positive judgement following an institutional quality assurance assessment. The assessment is based on a discussion with peers regarding the content and quality of the programme. It focuses on six questions:

1. What is the programme aiming for?
2. With what curriculum?
3. With what staff?
4. With what services and facilities?
5. How does the programme intend to safeguard quality?
6. Is the programme achieving its objectives?

These six questions have been translated into six themes and 16 standards. Regarding each of these standards, an assessment panel gives a substantiated judgement on a four-point scale: unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good or excellent. The panel subsequently gives a substantiated final conclusion regarding the overall quality of the programme, on the same four-point scale.

4.2 Assessment framework for extensive programme assessments

Intended learning outcomes

Standard 1: *The intended learning outcomes of the programme have been concretised with regard to content, level and orientation; they meet international requirements.*

Explanation: As for level and orientation (bachelor's or master's; professional or academic), the intended learning outcomes fit into the Dutch qualifications framework. In addition, they tie in with the international perspective of the requirements currently set by the professional field and the discipline with regard to the contents of the programme.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Curriculum

Standard 2: *The orientation of the curriculum assures the development of skills in the field of scientific research and/or the professional practice.*

Explanation: The curriculum has demonstrable links with current developments in the professional field and the discipline.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 3: *The contents of the curriculum enable students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.*

Explanation: The learning outcomes have been adequately translated into attainment targets for (components of) the curriculum. Students follow a study curriculum which is coherent in terms of content.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 4: *The structure of the curriculum encourages study and enables students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.*

Explanation: The teaching concept is in line with the intended learning outcomes and the teaching formats tie in with the teaching concept.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 5: *The curriculum ties in with the qualifications of the incoming students.*

Explanation: The admission requirements are realistic with a view to the intended learning outcomes.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 6: *The curriculum is feasible.*

Explanation: Factors pertaining to the curriculum and hindering students' progress are removed as far as possible. In addition, students with functional disabilities receive additional career tutoring.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 7: *The programme meets statutory requirements regarding the scope and duration of the curriculum.*

Explanation: Scope and duration:

- Bachelor's programmes (professional orientation): 240 credits;
- Bachelor's programmes (academic orientation): in principle, a minimum of 180 credits;
- Master's programmes (professional orientation): in principle, a minimum of 60 credits;
- Master's programmes (academic orientation): in principle, a minimum of 60 credits, depending on the programme.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory (weighted and substantiated).

Staff

Standard 8: *The programme has an effective staff policy in place.*

Explanation: The staff policy provides for the qualifications, training, assessment and size of the staff required for the realisation of the curriculum.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 9: *The staff is qualified for the realisation of the curriculum in terms of content, educational expertise and organisation.*

Explanation: The factual expertise available among the staff ties in with the requirements set for professional or academic higher education programmes.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 10: *The size of the staff is sufficient for the realisation of the curriculum.*

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Services and facilities

Standard 11: *The accommodation and the facilities (infrastructure) are sufficient for the realisation of the curriculum.*

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 12: *Tutoring and student information provision bolster students' progress and tie in with the needs of students.*

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Quality assurance

Standard 13: *The programme is evaluated on a regular basis, partly on the basis of assessable targets.*

Explanation: The programme ensures the quality of the intended learning outcomes, the curriculum, the staff, the services and facilities, the assessments and the learning outcomes achieved through regular evaluations. The programme also collects management information regarding the success rates and the staff-student ratio.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 14: *The outcomes of these evaluations constitute the basis for demonstrable measures for improvement that contribute to the realisation of the targets.*

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Standard 15: *Programme committees, examining boards, staff, students, alumni and the relevant professional field of the programme are actively involved in the programme's internal quality assurance.*

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

Assessment and learning outcomes achieved

Standard 16: *The programme has an adequate assessment system in place and demonstrates that the intended learning outcomes are achieved.*

Explanation: The level achieved is demonstrated by interim and final tests, final projects and the performance of graduates in actual practice or in subsequent programmes. The tests and assessments are valid, reliable and transparent to the students.

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

General conclusion

The quality of the programme is

Judgement: Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent (weighted and substantiated).

The assessment is based on the following definitions. These definitions relate to both the scores obtained for the individual standards and the overall scores awarded to the programme.

Generic quality

The quality that can reasonably be expected in an international perspective from a higher education bachelor's or master's programme.

Unsatisfactory

The programme does not satisfy the current generic quality standards and shows serious shortcomings in several areas.

Satisfactory

The programme satisfies the current generic quality standards and shows an acceptable level across its entire spectrum.

Good

The programme systematically surpasses the current generic quality standards across its entire spectrum.

Excellent

The programme systematically well surpasses the current generic quality standards across its entire spectrum and is regarded as an (inter)national example.

Chapter 8 presents examples for the operationalisation of these assessments.

4.3 Composition of the assessment panel¹¹

It is imperative that assessment panels are composed in a manner allowing meaningful discussions among peers, in which the panel remains sufficiently independent. The institution convenes the panel, appoints a secretary and subsequently presents the panel to NVAO for approval. To that end the institution provides data on the expertise and independence of the panel members and the secretary, in a manner stipulated by NVAO. The institution may also commission an external quality assessment agency to convene a panel; in such cases the panel must also be presented to NVAO for approval.

The panel secretary has completed NVAO training leading to certification. Every year, NVAO publishes a list of NVAO certified secretaries.

Assessment panels must meet the following requirements.

¹¹ This paragraph is explained in detail in the guideline titled *Eisen aan de panelsamenstelling* [Requirements for the composition of panels]. This guideline contains detailed requirements to be met by panels. It also contains a submission procedure, a form to be filled out by the institution and a code of conduct for panel members.

1. The panel is composed of a minimum of four members, among whom at least two authoritative domain experts¹² and a student.
2. Overall, the panel commands the following expertise:
 - a. expertise regarding developments in the discipline,
 - b. international expertise,
 - c. practical expertise in the professional field relevant to the programme (if applicable),
 - d. experience in teaching and educational development at the relevant programme level and expertise regarding the teaching format(s) used in the programme¹³,
 - e. student-related expertise,
 - f. assessment or audit expertise.
3. The panel is independent (its members have not had any ties with the institution providing the programme for at least the past five years).
4. The panel is assisted by an independent, external secretary trained and certified by NVAO. The secretary does not sit on the panel.

Prior to the visit, all panel members and the secretary certify to not maintaining any connections or ties with the institution in question, either as a private individual or as a researcher / teacher, professional or adviser, which could affect an independent judgement of the quality of the programme in either a positive or a negative sense, and to not having had such connections or ties with the institution during the past five years.

In addition to the factual independence, as expressed above in the nature of the relation and the number of years, it is essential for any panel member or secretary to feel independent. In some cases, an independence of more than five years may not provide sufficient guarantee for an independent position; a prospective panel member or secretary could still experience too strong a relationship with the institution or be involved too closely with an institution or programme, for example because of family ties. In such cases, the prospective panel member or secretary cannot sit on the panel. Panel membership requires a professional attitude. To that end, NVAO has formulated a code of conduct for panel members and secretaries. This code of conduct comprises elements pertaining to the independence, confidentiality and attitude of the panel members and the secretary during the assessment process.

Panel members and secretaries will sign a declaration of independence and confidentiality prior to the assessment process. In this declaration, they attest to having taken note of the code of conduct. Following the assessment process, the chair and secretary sign the assessment report once all panel members have read and approved the report. The report includes a declaration that the assessment has been carried out independently.

¹² Domain expertise is understood to mean specialist expertise, international expertise or professional expertise.

¹³ This includes, for example, distance learning, work-related courses, flexible education, skill-oriented education or education aimed at excellent students.

Stakeholders such as panel members, staff or students may report to NVAO any matters arising during the assessment process that could affect the independence of the assessment or pertain to other complaints regarding the panels or secretaries.

4.4 Assessment process

4.4.1 Critical reflection

For the purpose of the assessment by the assessment panel, the programme presents a critical reflection of the programme. The critical reflection follows the standards outlined for the limited programme assessment framework and describes the programme's strengths and weaknesses. In its critical reflection, the programme outlines how it checks student and staff satisfaction and reports on the results. Underpinning documents are made available for the panel to inspect. In addition, the report indicates which measures for improvement have been taken following the previous assessment. The critical reflection is a self-contained document that can be read separately.

The critical reflection is the pre-eminent tool to allow teachers and peers to comment on the contents of the programme. Therefore, it must be a document in which teachers and students recognise the programme.

In addition, the assessment framework offers opportunities to discuss the ambitions of the programme during the site visit, rather than focus on the results obtained in the past. What choices will the programme make for the future, what direction will it take? In order to conduct such discussions, the assessment panel is expected to be able to reflect on the programme's plans for the future, together with the programme's representatives.

The critical reflection comprises a maximum of 40 pages, excluding appendices.

4.4.2 Site visit

The required site visit for the purpose of an extensive programme assessment takes about two days. In the event of a collective assessment of comparable programmes within a single institution, the duration may be reduced proportionally.

Prior to the visit, the assessment panel has studied a number of final projects in order to gain insight into the exit level attained in the programme. To that end, a selection is made from a comprehensive overview drawn up by the programme. The final projects, the relevant assessment criteria and the requirements are forwarded to the panel members prior to the visit, or the panel members examine the documents on site prior to the visit. Prior to the visit, the panel members form a preliminary opinion about the programme and draw up questions for their site visit.

During the site visit, the assessment panel will, in any case, meet with the programme management, members of the examining board and the programme committee, teachers, students, alumni and wherever relevant, representatives of the professional field. In addition, the panel examines the material made available by the programme. The panel determines the exact scope of the discussions, the possible clustering of discussion participants and the further organisation of the visit. The panel decides at its own discretion which teachers and students it would like to see and which documents it would like to examine. In principle, the programme delegations comprise no more than six persons. The panel will set aside time for open consultations. The programme and the panel will make

these open consultations widely known, both prior to and during the visit. In addition, the panel may visit lectures or other teaching-learning situations, such in consultation with the programme.

At the end of the site visit, the chair of the assessment panel provides brief feedback information to the programme regarding the general judgement and the underlying considerations.

4.4.3 *Assessment procedure within the assessment panel*

The assessment panel presents its judgement regarding all the standards incorporated in the assessment framework. This judgement is substantiated by an appraisal of the positive and critical elements from the panel's findings. The judgement may be: unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good or excellent. The panel subsequently formulates a general, weighted and substantiated judgement regarding the quality of the programme. This judgement is also given on a four-point scale, ranging from unsatisfactory to excellent.

4.4.4 *Assessment report*

The assessment panel secretary draws up an assessment report comprising some 30 pages. The main content of the report features the panel's judgements regarding the standards. It is important for the audit panel to include underpinnings based on the programme's critical reflection, the meetings with representatives of the programme and the underlying data from the documents made available. The report will include significant and representative examples. In its report, the panel gives an account of the manner in which it has organised its visit and how it has arrived at its choice of discussion partners and documents.

The assessment report is preceded by a summary judgement regarding the quality of the programme, comprising a maximum of two pages. Any measures for improvement will be presented in a separate paragraph. In addition, the report contains a score table with the panel judgements, information on the date(s) of the site visit, the names of the discussion partners, basic data concerning the programme (see paragraph 4.6), an overview of the material studied and the declarations of independence signed by the panel members and the secretary.

The assessment panel secretary forwards the advisory report to the board of the institution once all panel members have approved its contents. The institution is given the opportunity to respond to any factual inaccuracies in the report, whereupon the panel chair endorses the report after all panel members have taken note of and approved its contents. The report is signed by the chair and the secretary of the panel.

4.5 **NVAO decision-making**

The board of the institution applies to NVAO for accreditation based on the assessment report. NVAO may decide to accredit the programme, not accredit it or grant an improvement period. The Accreditation Decree of the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act stipulates how, on what grounds and under what circumstances NVAO may grant an improvement period.

4.6 Required documents

During the assessment process, the programme provides the assessment panel with a limited number of documents. NVAO assumes that these are existing documents, available within the institution, rather than documents prepared especially for the programme assessment. The documents serve as a substantiation and if need be as verification. Other material is only required when explicitly requested by the panel or if the programme wishes to demonstrate a particular distinctive feature.

4.6.1 *Basic data concerning the programme*

(The basic data is incorporated into the critical reflection, the assessment report and the NVAO decision.)

Administrative data regarding the programme

1. Nomenclature of the programme in CROHO [central register of higher education programmes];
2. Orientation and level of the programme;
3. Number of credits;
4. Specialisations;
5. Location(s);
6. Mode (s) of study;
7. CROHO registration number.

Administrative data regarding the institution

1. Name of the institution;
2. Status of the institution (publicly funded or legal body providing higher education);

Quantitative data regarding the programme

1. Data on intake, transfers and graduates pertaining to – if possible – the last six cohorts;
2. Teacher -student ratio achieved;
3. Average amount of face-to-face instruction per stage of the study programme (a stage can be expressed in, for example, regular years of study, the work placement and the graduation period).

4.6.2 *Required appendices to the critical reflection*

(The list of appendices studied will be incorporated into the assessment report.)

1. Subject-specific reference framework and the learning outcomes of the programme;
2. Overview of the curriculum in diagram form;
3. Outline description of the curriculum components, stating learning outcomes, attainment targets, teaching method(s), assessment method, literature (mandatory/recommended), teacher and credits;
4. Teaching and examination regulations;
(Items 2 to 4 are usually reflected in a study guide, in which case this can be annexed to the report.)
5. Overview of allocated staff with names, positions, scope of appointment, level and expertise;
6. List of the last 25 final projects or the final projects of the past two years (or portfolios / projects demonstrating the exit levels attained by the students);

7. Overview of the contacts maintained with the professional field (if relevant).

4.6.3 *Documents made available during the visit*

(The list of material studied will be incorporated into the assessment report.)

1. Education policy plan or similar document(s);
2. Policy plan regarding research in relation to the programmes offered or similar document(s);
3. Staff (policy) plan or similar document(s);
4. Services and facilities plan or similar document(s);
5. Quality assurance plan;
6. Policy plan regarding the accessibility and feasibility of the programme for students with a functional disability;
7. Summary and analysis of recent evaluation results and relevant management information;
8. Documentation regarding student and staff satisfaction;
9. Reports on consultations in relevant committees / bodies;
10. Test questions with corresponding assessment criteria and requirements (answer models) and a representative selection of actual tests administered (such as presentations, work placements, portfolio assessments) and assessments;
11. Representative selection of final projects, selected by the panel, of the past two years with corresponding assessment criteria and requirements;
12. Reference books and other learning materials.

6 Distinctive features

6.1 Background

The distinctive features have been incorporated into the accreditation system because they can contribute to the national and international profiling of higher education programmes. A distinctive feature enables institutions to draw attention to aspects that are not directly related to programme levels but involve, for example, the orientation of a programme (such as research master's programmes), objectives such as sustainability or the residential nature.

Distinctive features are assessed on the basis of the following principles:

1. The audit panel or assessment panel assesses a distinctive feature by reference to the relevant framework in combination with the criteria set out below. The panel ascertains whether the institution or programme profiling the distinctive feature fulfils its promise.
2. To that end, the panel determines, in consultation with the institution or programme, what standards it will focus on during the assessment.
3. The required comparison with other relevant institutions or programmes is performed by the institution or programme itself.
4. The composition of the assessing panel is geared to the assessment of the distinctive feature.
5. The point of departure is that an institution or programme may apply for assessment of a distinctive feature at any time. However, its accreditation period may not exceed the final date of the original application.
6. A distinctive feature must meet the following criteria.
- 7.

6.2 Criteria for distinctive features

Distinguishing nature

Criterion 1: *The distinctive feature distinguishes the institution or programme from other relevant institutions or programmes in the Dutch higher education sector.*

Explanation: The institution or programme demonstrates that the distinctive feature has a distinguishing but not necessarily unique nature *vis-à-vis* relevant institutions or programmes in the Dutch higher education sector.

Judgement: Meets, does not meet or partially meets the standard (weighted and substantiated).

Concretisation

Criterion 2: *The impact of the distinctive feature on the quality of the education provided has been operationalised on the basis of the relevant standards in the appropriate assessment framework.*

Explanation: The assessing panel indicates which standard(s) it regards as relevant to the realisation of the feature and why. The judgement must demonstrate the operationalisation of the distinctive feature for the relevant standard(s). If a distinctive feature spans several standards in the framework in question, the judgement should provide a concrete and complete assessment of the feature for all standards concerned.

Judgement: Meets, does not meet or partially meets the standard (weighted and substantiated).

General conclusion

The distinctive feature is

Judgement: Granted, not granted (weighted and substantiated).

7 Assessment scales for programme assessments

Each judgement is illustrated with a number of examples to assist in its operationalisation.

Examples that apply exclusively to extensive programme assessments are marked “EPA”.

7.1 Unsatisfactory

The programme does not meet the current generic quality standards and shows serious shortcomings in several areas.

This judgement could be operationalised as follows:

- The level and/or orientation of the learning outcomes do not fit within the (inter)national qualification frameworks and have not been concretised into subject- or programme-specific performance levels.
- The aggregate of curriculum, staff, services and facilities does not constitute an environment conducive to learning.
- The programme lacks a programme-wide, transparent and coherent assessment policy.
- The intended learning outcomes are not being achieved.
- Quality assurance in the programme is not pursued in a systematic manner, which translates into a lack of improvement policy (EPA).

7.2 Satisfactory

The programme meets the current generic quality standards and demonstrates an acceptable level across its entire spectrum.

This judgement could be operationalised as follows:

- The level and/or orientation of the learning outcomes fit within the (inter)national qualification frameworks and have been concretised into subject- or programme-specific performance levels.
- The aggregate of curriculum, staff, services and facilities constitutes an environment conducive to learning which enables students to achieve the learning outcomes.
- The programme has developed a programme-wide, transparent and coherent assessment policy, which, however, is not yet pursued by all parties involved.
- The intended learning outcomes are achieved.
- Quality assurance in the programme is pursued in a systematic manner, which translates into a consistent improvement policy (EPA).

7.3 Good

The programme systematically surpasses the current generic quality standard across its entire spectrum.

This judgement could be operationalised as follows:

- The level and/or orientation of the learning outcomes fit within the (inter)national qualification frameworks and have been concretised into subject- or programme-specific performance levels. These are given a specific interpretation based on the programme's explicit views.
- The aggregate of curriculum, staff, services and facilities constitutes a challenging learning environment.
- The programme has developed a programme-wide, transparent and coherent assessment policy, which is pursued by all parties involved.
- The learning outcomes achieved translate into products that are systematically above average.
- Quality assurance in the programme is pursued in a systematic manner, which translates into a consistent improvement policy that is reflected in a growing quality culture (EPA).

7.4 Excellent

The programme systematically well surpasses the current generic quality standards across its entire spectrum and is regarded as an (inter)national example.

This judgement could be operationalised as follows:

- The level and/or orientation of the learning outcomes fit within the (inter)national qualification frameworks and have been concretised into subject- or programme-specific performance levels. These are given a specific interpretation based on the programme's explicit and unique views. The programme serves as an example both nationally and internationally.
- The aggregate of curriculum, staff, services and facilities constitutes an innovative, original learning environment.
- The learning outcomes achieved are of excellent quality and translate into awards and (inter)national publications.
- Quality assurance in the programme is pursued in a systematic manner, which translates into a consistent improvement policy and a strong ability for self-reflection. This is reflected in a robust quality culture (EPA).

8 Assessment rules

8.1 Programme assessments

For programmes offering various modes of study (for example, full-time, part-time and work-based learning), the assessment must demonstrate that the generic quality of each mode of study is assured, based on the standards in the relevant assessment framework, in order to arrive at a positive final conclusion regarding the programme.

Programmes that are offered at various locations under a single CROHO registration only qualify for accreditation if the assessment shows that each location meets the generic quality standards stated in the relevant framework.

Limited programme assessments

- The final conclusion regarding a programme will always be “unsatisfactory” if standard 3 is judged “unsatisfactory”. In case of an unsatisfactory score on standard 1, NVAO cannot grant an improvement period.
- The final conclusion regarding a programme can only be “good” if at least two standards are judged “good”; one of these must be standard 3.
- The final conclusion regarding a programme can only be “excellent” if at least two standards are judged “excellent”; one of these must be standard 3.

Extensive programme assessments

- The final conclusion regarding a programme will always be “unsatisfactory” if standard 1 or standard 16 is judged “unsatisfactory”. In case of an unsatisfactory score on standard 1, NVAO cannot grant an improvement period.
- The final conclusion regarding a programme can only be “good” if at least standards 1, 3, 6, 9, 13, 14, 15 and 16 are judged “good”.
- The final conclusion regarding a programme can only be “excellent” if standards 1, 3, 6, 9, 13, 14, 15 and 16 are judged “excellent”.

9 Accreditation Decision under the Higher Education and Research Act

In this chapter, NVAO outlines the rules laid down by implementing regulations [Dutch: AMVB] regarding conditional decisions and the granting of improvement periods. The Dutch Higher Education and Research Act [WHW] stipulates that implementing regulations be formulated to specify the conditions under which and the situations in which improvement periods may be granted in the accreditation of programmes (Article 5a.12a, first paragraph), the conditional initial accreditation of programmes (Article 5a.11, fourth paragraph) and conditional institutional quality assurance assessments (Article 5a.13d, sixth paragraph). In this document, this implementing regulation is referred to as: Accreditation Decision under the Higher Education and Research Act.

9.1 Conditional initial accreditation and institutional quality assurance assessment

NVAO may attach conditions to an initial accreditation or institutional quality assurance assessment if, on the basis of the advice submitted by the panel of experts, it arrives at the conclusion that certain quality aspects are unsatisfactory but can reasonably be remedied within a timeframe of one year.

With regard to initial accreditations, this pertains to both extensive and limited assessments (Article 5a.10a, second paragraph, and Article 5a.13g, first paragraph). In a conditional initial accreditation of institutional quality assurance assessment, the conditions in question relate to the efforts expected from the board of the institution to improve the quality aspects that are assessed as unsatisfactory as well as the manner in which these efforts must be expended, the manner in which and the timeframe within which the board of the institution must ultimately report on these efforts to NVAO and the communication by the board of the institution to the students and other stakeholders regarding the conditions set.

The timeframe to be observed for reporting must logically follow the timeframe allowed to implement the improvements. A timeframe shorter than one year may be set if, in the opinion of NVAO, the improvements may be realised sooner. Communication is important because students must be informed to the full when selecting a study programme. This information is also relevant to others, such as employers with whom the institution maintains a special relationship and who employ many graduates.

An initial accreditation application must be denied if the standards of 'Intended learning outcomes' or 'Testing' are judged unsatisfactory. An application for an institutional quality assurance assessment must be denied if the standards of 'View of the quality of the education provided' or 'Improvement policy' are judged unsatisfactory. In those cases, a conditional initial accreditation or institutional quality assurance assessment cannot be granted.

9.2 Improvement period for accreditation

If NVAO assesses an application for the renewal of an existing accreditation or accreditation following an initial accreditation decision and determines that the programme does not meet all the required quality aspects, it may decide to renew the existing accreditation or initial accreditation and grant a so-called 'improvement period'. This pertains to both extensive

and limited accreditation assessments (Article 5a.8, second paragraph and Article 5a.13f, first paragraph).

An improvement period may only be granted if, in the opinion of NVAO, the deficiencies may reasonably be remedied within a timeframe of no more than two years.

The assessment report submitted by the assessment panel is essential in this respect. However, if the standard of 'Intended learning outcomes' is judged unsatisfactory, an improvement period cannot be granted and the application for accreditation must be denied. This is because a programme's ambitions level must be at least up to par. Generic quality is not guaranteed in programmes whose intended exit level is sub-standard; thus, they lack a critical quality culture and vision, the basis for good-quality higher education of world-class standards. In such cases, granting an improvement period is uncalled for.

NVAO may set conditions when granting an improvement period. In terms of content and function, these conditions correspond to the conditions that may be attached to initial accreditations and institutional quality assurance assessments. The difference from conditional initial accreditations and institutional quality assurance assessments, however, is that the board of the institution is required to submit a new application to NVAO no later than six months before the end of the improvement period, viz. an application for a decision to determine whether the programme meets the accreditation framework as yet (Article 5a.12a, fourth and fifth paragraphs of the Act).

Similar to the points for improvement in initial accreditations, an improvement period may be shorter than two years if, in the opinion of NVAO, improvement may be achieved within a shorter space of time. The above timeframe for submitting applications is, however, based on the assumption that extensions of the validity by a period of less than one year would be improbable. In addition, an unsatisfactory score on the 'Testing and learning outcomes achieved' standard warrants a maximum improvement period of one year, i.e., any improvements on this standard must be feasible within a year, otherwise renewal of the existing accreditation or initial accreditation cannot be granted. The assessment panel reviews the manner in which the institution has remedied the deficiencies identified by NVAO and determines whether the programme meanwhile scores satisfactorily on all the statutory quality aspects.

By analogy with Article 5a. 2, second paragraph of the Act, the assessment panel that reviews the improvement must be approved by NVAO, as does the assessment panel that originally assessed the programme. The assessment panel that reviews the improvement comprises, as a minimum, two domain experts from the panel that originally assessed the programme.

10 Appeals

Before making a decision regarding an institutional quality assurance assessment, limited programme assessment, extensive programme assessment, limited initial accreditation or extensive initial accreditation, NVAO allows the board of the institution a term of two weeks to present its views concerning the intended decision. These two weeks fall within the statutory time frame of six months (for institutional quality assurance assessments, limited initial accreditations and extensive initial accreditations) or three months (for limited programme assessments and extensive programme assessments) within which NVAO is required to make its decision.

Once ratified, the decision is immediately forwarded to the board of the institution. At the same time, NVAO publishes its decision by placing it on its web site.

NVAO decisions are open to appeal.

Stakeholders may lodge an internal appeal with NVAO. The time frame for lodging internal appeals is six weeks. The processing of the appeal involves a hearing. NVAO makes its decision within twelve weeks after receiving the appeal. A decision after appeal may be postponed for no more than six weeks. Such postponement is communicated in writing. NVAO decisions after appeal are open to external appeals with the Administrative Jurisdiction Department of the Council of State. The time frame for lodging external appeals is six weeks. In principle, the Department gives its verdict six weeks after the session. This term can be extended by a maximum of six weeks.

Pending the internal or external appeal procedure, the Chair of the Administrative Jurisdiction Department of the Council of State may be requested to make provisional arrangements if urgency, due to the interests involved, so requires.