

Assessment frameworks
for the higher education
accreditation system
Distinctive features

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Contents

1	Structure of the system	4
3	Distinctive features	6
	3.1 Background	6
	3.2 Criteria for distinctive features	6
4	Appeals	8

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 Distinctive features

3.1 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.

3.2 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).

4 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.