

ACCREDITATION FRAMEWORK

FLANDERS

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1. THE STRUCTURE OF THE ACCREDITATION FRAMEWORK

NVAO is charged by treaty to grant (initial) accreditation to bachelor and master's programmes in The Netherlands and Flanders. The present accreditation framework¹ refers to applications for accreditation from higher education institutions in Flanders.

There are two ways according to which NVAO can grant accreditation and assess whether the programme has sufficient generic quality standards (Clause 58 of the Flemish Act regarding the Higher Education Structure):

1. Either NVAO grants accreditation based on a published external assessment report.
2. Either NVAO grants accreditation based on an international accreditation decision if this accreditation was granted using a comparable methodological approach.

Chapter 2 describes the framework for the assessment of programmes in higher education based on an external assessment report.

To assess whether a higher education programme can be granted accreditation, the programme is assessed according to six themes (see chapter 2.1). These themes are:

1. Aims and objectives
2. Curriculum
3. Staff
4. Services
5. Internal quality assurance
6. Results

These themes are assessed according to standards and corresponding criteria, with a differentiation as to level (bachelor or master) and orientation (professional or academic) of the programme.

A higher education institution can request a quality assessment agency to carry out an assessment of distinctive quality features of a programme undergoing an assessment procedure. This feature can then be included in the assessment report. The assessment of distinctive quality features does not affect the outcome of an accreditation procedure. (See Chapter 2.2)

To assess a programme, an assessment scale is used and assessment rules are applied based on the judgement of the underlying standards. (See Chapter 2.3)

The final accreditation decision depends on NVAO's evaluation of the assessment procedure used by the quality assessment agency and the assessment report. To this end, criteria were adopted for the evaluation of the procedure and the assessment report by the quality assessment agency. (See Chapter 2.4)

Chapter 3 describes the criteria according to which NVAO can grant accreditation based on equivalence of an international accreditation. These criteria relate to the equivalence of the methodological approach used by the international accreditation organisation.

Chapter 4 describes the transitional arrangement (period 2005 – 2013) for the assessment and accreditation of converted bachelor and master's programmes at university colleges, concerning the inter-relatedness between education and research.

The explanatory part outlines:

- The clauses of the accreditation framework laid down in the Flemish Act.
- accreditation by virtue of law during the transitional period

¹ Clause 10.1 of the Accreditation Treaty gives NVAO the responsibility to develop an assessment framework. Based on this framework, NVAO assesses whether there are sufficient generic quality standards. This framework should be ratified by the Flemish government.

2. ACCREDITATION BASED ON AN EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT REPORT

2.1. THE ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

2.1.1. Aims and objectives

STANDARDS	CRITERIA
LEVEL & ORIENTATION	<p>The intended learning outcomes of the programme correspond with the following descriptions of a:</p> <p><i>Bachelor's programme (professional orientation):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - general competences such as the capacity for logical thought and reasoning, the ability to acquire and process information, the ability for critical reflection and project-based work, creativity, the ability to perform simple supervision tasks, the ability to communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialists as well as laymen, and a positive attitude towards life-long learning - general professional competences like the ability to work together as part of a team, a solution-oriented attitude in the sense of being able to define and analyse independently complex problematic situations in professional practice, and the ability to develop and apply effective strategies to solve them, and to develop a sense of social responsibility in connection with the professional practice - specific professional competences at the level of a newly-qualified professional <p><i>Bachelor's programme (Academic orientation):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - general competences such as the capacity for logical thought and reasoning, the ability to acquire and process information, the capacity for critical reflection, creativity, being able to perform simple management tasks, the ability to communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialists as well as laymen and a positive attitude towards life-long learning - general academic competences such as a research attitude, knowledge of research methodologies and techniques and the ability to apply them adequately, the ability to collect the relevant data that can influence the formation of an opinion about social, scientific and ethical issues, appreciation of uncertainty, ambiguity and the limits of knowledge, and the ability to initiate problem-driven research - an understanding of basic academic, discipline-related knowledge inherent to a certain domain of the sciences or the arts, systematic understanding of the key elements of a discipline which includes acquiring coherent and detailed knowledge that is inspired partly by the most recent developments in the discipline, and an understanding of the structure of the specialisation and its inter-relatedness with other specialities <p><i>Master's Programme</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - general competences at an advanced level such as the ability to reason and act in an academic manner, the ability to handle complex problems, the ability to reflect on one's own thoughts and work, and the ability to convert this reflection into the development of more effective solutions, the ability to communicate one's own research and solutions to professional colleagues and laymen, and the ability to develop an opinion in an uncertain context - general academic competences at an advanced level such as the

ability to apply research methods and techniques, the ability to design research, the ability to apply paradigms in the domain of the sciences or the arts and the ability to indicate the limits of paradigms, originality and creativity regarding the continuously expanding body of knowledge and insight, and the ability to collaborate in a multi-disciplinary environment

- advanced understanding and insight in scientific, discipline- specific knowledge inherent to a certain domain of the sciences or the arts, insight in the most recent knowledge in the subject/discipline or parts of it, the ability to follow and interpret the direction in which theory formation is developing, the ability to make an original contribution towards the body of knowledge of one or several parts of the subject/discipline, and display specific competences characteristic for the subject/discipline such as designing, researching, analysing and diagnosing
- the competences needed for either independent research or the independent practice of the arts at the level of a newly-qualified researcher (in the arts), or the general and specific professional competences needed for independent application of academic or artistic knowledge at the level of a newly-qualified professional

SUBJECT-/DISCIPLINE-SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS	<p>The intended learning outcomes of the programme correspond with the requirements set by professional colleagues, both nationally and internationally, and the relevant domain concerned (subject/discipline and/or professional practice or practice of the arts). In the case of regulated professions, the requirements correspond with the regulation or legislation concerned</p> <p>The learning outcomes of bachelor's programmes have been authenticated by the relevant professional field</p> <p>The learning outcomes of academic bachelor and master's programmes stem from requirements set by the academic and/or artistic discipline, international academic practice and, for programmes to which this applies, the practice in the relevant professional field.</p>
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2.1.2. Curriculum

STANDARDS	CRITERIA
REQUIREMENTS FOR PROFESSIONAL / ACADEMIC ORIENTATION	<p>The proposed curriculum corresponds with the following criteria for a professional or an academic orientation:</p> <p><i>Professional orientation (bachelor's programme):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students develop their knowledge through the study of professional literature, the study of material derived from professional practice or practice of the arts and through interaction with the professional field, practice of the arts and/or (applied) research; - The curriculum has verifiable links with current developments in the professional field or the discipline; - The curriculum ensures the development of professional or artistic competences and has verifiable links with current professional practice. <p><i>Academic orientation (bachelor and master's programme):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students develop their knowledge through the interaction between education and research (including research in the arts) within relevant disciplines; - The curriculum corresponds with current developments in the relevant discipline(s) through verifiable links with current scientific theories; - The curriculum ensures the development of competences in the field of research and/or the development and practice of the arts; - Where appropriate, the curriculum has verifiable links with the current relevant professional practice.

CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN THE AIMS AND OBJECTIVES, AND THE CURRICULUM	<p>The curriculum is an adequate realisation of the intended learning outcomes of the programme and this regards the level, the orientation and the subject-/discipline-specific requirements.</p> <p>The intended learning outcomes are adequately transferred into the educational goals of the curriculum or parts thereof.</p> <p>The contents of the curriculum ensure the students' achievement of the intended learning outcomes.</p>
CONSISTENCY OF THE CURRICULUM	<p>The contents of the curriculum are internally consistent</p>
WORKLOAD	<p>The actual duration of the programme is assessed and corresponds with the norm of 60 ECTS per academic year</p> <p>The intended learning outcomes are attainable because conditions that interfere with possible study progress are eliminated where possible</p>
ADMISSION REQUIREMENTS	<p>The structure and contents of the curriculum are in line with the qualifications of the incoming students²:</p> <p><i>Bachelor's programme:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secondary school leaving certificate, <i>Diploma van het Hoger Onderwijs van het korte type met volledig leerplan</i>, <i>Diploma van het Hoger Onderwijs voor Sociale Promotie</i> or a diploma or certificate that is recognised as equivalent in accordance with a law, decree, European directive or another international agreement • Predefined conditions set by the institution for individuals who do not meet the above mentioned requirements <p><i>Advanced bachelor's programme (Bachelor of Advanced Studies, BAS):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A bachelor's degree, with a qualification or qualifications specified in more detail by the management of the institution, possibly supplemented with an assessment concerning the fitness or capacity of the individual, or with a preparatory programme <p><i>Master's programme (MA):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A bachelor's degree, with a qualification or qualifications specified in more detail by the management of the institution, possibly supplemented with an individualised curriculum, a preparatory programme or a bridging programme <p><i>Advanced master's programme (Master of Advanced Studies, MAS):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A master's degree, with a qualification or qualifications specified in more detail by the management of the institution, possibly supplemented with an assessment concerning the fitness or capacity of the individual, or with a preparatory programme
CREDITS	<p>The curriculum meets the legal requirements regarding the association of credits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bachelor's degree: at least 180 credits - Advanced bachelor's degree: at least 60 credits - Master's degree: at least 60 credits - Advanced master's degree: at least 60 credits
COHERENCE OF STRUCTURE AND CONTENTS	<p>The educational concept is in line with the aims and objectives. The study methods correspond with this educational concept.</p>

²The admission requirements are laid down in the Flemish Act. Starting in 2005-2006 these requirements are laid down in the Act on Flexible Pathways in Higher Education. These requirements are identical.

LEARNING ASSESSMENT	By means of evaluations, tests and examinations, the students are assessed in an adequate and for them insightful way to determine whether they have achieved the intended learning outcomes of the programme or parts thereof.
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MASTER'S THESIS	The master's programme course is concluded with the master's thesis whereby the student demonstrates the ability for analytic and synthetic reasoning, for independent problem solving at an academic level or for artistic creation. The work reflects the general critical-reflective attitude or the research attitude of the student. The master's thesis corresponds to at least a fifth of the total number of credits with a minimum of 15 and a maximum of 30 credits
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2.1.3. Staff

STANDARDS	CRITERIA
REQUIREMENTS FOR PROFESSIONAL / ACADEMIC ORIENTATION	The programme meets the following criteria for the deployment of staff for a programme with a professional or an academic orientation: <i>Professional orientation:</i> – Teaching is principally provided by staff who link the programme to the professional practice or practice of the arts <i>Academic orientation:</i> – Teaching is principally provided by researchers who contribute to the development of the subject/discipline (including research in the arts) – In addition, and where appropriate, sufficient staff will be deployed with knowledge of and insight in the professional field or practice of the arts concerned
QUANTITY OF STAFF	Sufficient staff is deployed to realise the desired quality of the programme.
QUALITY OF STAFF	The staff deployed are sufficiently qualified to ensure that the aims and objectives regarding the content, didactics and organisation of the programme are achieved

2.1.4. Services

STANDARDS	CRITERIA
FACILITIES	Housing and facilities are adequate to achieve the learning outcomes.
TUTORING	Tutoring and information provision are adequate in view of study progress. Tutoring and information provision correspond with the students' needs.

2.1.5. Internal Quality Assurance system

STANDARDS	CRITERIA
PERIODICAL EVALUATIONS	The curriculum is periodically evaluated in the light of verifiable objectives and other measures.
MEASURES FOR IMPROVEMENT	The outcomes of the evaluation form the basis of verifiable measures for improvement that contribute to the achievement of the objectives.
INVOLVEMENT OF STAFF, STUDENTS, ALUMNI AND THE PROFESSIONAL FIELD	Staff, students, alumni, and the relevant professional field are actively involved in the internal quality assurance system.

2.1.6. Results

STANDARDS	CRITERIA
ACHIEVED LEARNING OUTCOMES	The achieved learning outcomes correspond with the aims and objectives regarding level, orientation and subject-/discipline-specific requirements.
STUDY PROGRESS	Target figures that are comparable to other relevant programmes are formulated to express the expected success rate.
	The programme's success rate complies with these target figures

2.2. DISTINCTIVE QUALITY FEATURES

The aim of accreditation is to establish whether a programme complies with generic quality standards. To this end, the programme is assessed according to NVAO's assessment framework (cf. Chapter 2.1). Additionally, institutions are given the opportunity to emphasise distinctive quality features. An institution can request NVAO to assess distinctive quality features of a programme. This can lead to an annotation in the accreditation report that the programme does indeed possess this distinctive quality feature. The assessment of a distinctive quality feature has no influence on the accreditation decision of NVAO.

A distinctive quality feature must fulfil the following criteria:

STANDARDS	CRITERIA
DISTINCTIVENESS	The feature contributes in a meaningful way to the distinctiveness of the programme compared to the other higher education programmes.
QUALITY	The feature contributes to the quality of the programme.
SPECIFICATION	The effect of the feature for the quality of the programme itself (enrolment, educational programme, educational process, output, services, and staff quality) is substantial.

2.3. ASSESSMENT RULES

2.3.1. The assessment of the standards

An assessment panel performs the assessment of a programme: a panel of experts that is co-ordinated by a quality assessment agency. The methodology used by the quality assessment agency is established in its quality assessment protocol.

The assessment panel judges the standards in the assessment framework according to the following assessment scale:

STANDARDS	ASSESSMENT SCALE
	- 'excellent'
	- 'good'
	- 'satisfactory'
	- 'unsatisfactory'

2.3.2. The assessment of the programme

A final accreditation decision can only be based on positive judgements of the themes in the assessment framework.

This assessment panel judges the themes in the assessment framework according to the following assessment scale:

THEMES	ASSESSMENT SCALE
	- 'satisfactory'
	- 'unsatisfactory'

The assessment of a theme in the assessment framework is based on the assessments of the separate standards of that theme. The assessment panel has to demonstrate clearly how the assessment of the different standards led to the final conclusion concerning that theme. In other words, the panel has to clarify how the assessment of a theme is based on the assessments of the underlying standards.

In the final conclusion, the assessment panel needs to indicate how its conclusions are evidence-based, the panel's analysis of the evidence and its assessment using the accreditation framework. In the final

conclusion, the assessment panel indicates whether, based on the standards in the assessment framework, quality is satisfactorily present to warrant a positive final conclusion.

In the case of a programme with different specialisations, it needs to be clear from the assessment that there is satisfactory quality present in each specialisation to warrant a positive conclusion.

In case the same programme is offered at more than one location, it needs to be clear from the assessment that there is satisfactory quality present in each location to warrant a positive conclusion.

2.4. ACCREDITATION DECISION

2.4.1. Evaluation of the followed procedure and the assessment report

The quality assessment agency publishes the assessment report adopted by the assessment panel. NVAO evaluates the report in order to decide whether the programme can be accredited based on the report.

The procedure followed during the external assessment is described in the report in such a way that NVAO can evaluate it. NVAO verifies whether

1. the assessment panel followed the assessment protocol laid down by the quality assessment agency;
2. the framework used by the assessment panel includes at least the themes and standards of the accreditation framework of NVAO. This should include a subject-/discipline-specific interpretation;
3. the assessment panel adequately applied the assessment rules described in this accreditation framework;
4. the assessment report is in accordance with the criteria that are derived from the accreditation framework on the one hand, and with the criteria related to the methodology used by the quality assessment agency on the other hand. These criteria are described in the regulations for the validation of the assessment procedure used by the VLIR [Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad] and the VLHORA [Vlaamse Raad van Hogescholen] as quality assessment agencies, or in the regulations for the recognition of other quality assessment agencies.

NVAO determines whether the external assessment panel took great care in formulating its judgement. In this respect, NVAO verifies whether:

1. the external assessment done by the assessment panel contains a comparison with similar programmes and, if possible, with international descriptors or outcomes applicable to programmes in the domain concerned;
2. the report adopted by the assessment panel and published by the quality assessment agency contains sufficient evidence whether or not the programme fulfils the standards of the assessment framework (Chapter 2.1) and the report includes at least the six themes of NVAO's accreditation framework, paying attention to all the standards in each theme. Each standard is assessed on a four-point scale; the themes are assessed based on the underlying assessments of the standards. The assessments are as thoroughly as possible substantiated with evidence and analyses. The report is finalised with a summarised conclusion on the programme;
3. the report provides insight into the quality of the assessment panel (the panel of experts) that assessed the programme. In any case, information is provided about the size and composition of the assessment panel with reference to the knowledge and experience contributed by each member, as well as his or her independence, expertise and authority.

2.4.2. Accreditation decision

If NVAO determines that the external assessment panel took great care in formulating its judgement, the question arises whether sufficient generic quality standards were fulfilled.

When making its final decision, NVAO applies the same assessment rules as the assessment agency.

The essence of these assessment rules has been laid down in clauses 7 and 8 of the NVAO's Regulation for Decision-Making Procedures concerning (Initial) Accreditation of Programmes in the Flemish Community [In Dutch: "Reglement tot bepaling van bestuursbeginselen die van toepassing zijn bij de besluitvorming inzake accreditatie en toets nieuwe opleiding ten aanzien van opleidingen in de Vlaamse Gemeenschap"]. Clause 7 stipulates that an (initial) accreditation decision is positive if the overall mark for each theme described in the accreditation framework (see Chapter 2.1) is 'satisfactory'. If a standard is rated 'unsatisfactory', the overall mark for the theme under which it resorts can still be 'satisfactory' if the other standards of that theme are rated 'satisfactory'. Clause 8 stipulates that if a programme has separate specialisations or is offered at different locations, a theme is rated 'satisfactory' if that theme is rated 'satisfactory' for each separate specialisation or at each individual location.

3. THE ACCREDITATION PROCEDURE BASED ON AN INTERNATIONAL ACCREDITATION DECISION

In this chapter, the regulation is explained of the implementation of Clause 60 of the Flemish Act. This clause stipulates that when NVAO receives an application for accreditation of a programme that was already granted an international accreditation, i.e. a programme that was accredited by an accreditation organisation other than NVAO and based outside Flanders, NVAO needs to verify if this accreditation was granted using a comparable methodological approach in comparison with an accreditation that is granted based on an external review, as is normally the case in Flanders.

CRITERIA FOR EQUIVALENCE

General

The equivalence of an international accreditation granted by another accreditation organisation is assessed by criteria for equivalence whose contents can be clustered around five themes:

- the international accreditation decision is based on a positive assessment of the quality of the programme concerned;
- the international accreditation decision is of a recent enough date;
- the international accreditation decision is based on a public external review;
- the other accreditation organisation has an adequately functioning organisational structure;
- the other accreditation organisation applies valid quality standards.

In principle, all criteria for equivalence per theme should be met before NVAO can grant an accreditation.

Theme 1.

The international accreditation decision is based on a positive assessment of the quality of the programme concerned.

From the international accreditation decision or from the review that preceded that decision, it should be clear that the quality of the programme concerned was positively assessed. The accreditation may refer to other programmes as well, as long as there is a separate positive assessment that refers specifically to the programme concerned.

Theme 2

The international accreditation decision is of a recent enough date.

The international accreditation decision should be of a recent enough date to allow a reasonable judgement to be made as to the equivalence. For this reason, the accreditation decision by the accreditation organisation should not be taken more than one year prior to submitting the application for accreditation with NVAO.

Theme 3

The international accreditation decision is based on a public external review

The international accreditation decision should be based on a public external review of the programme concerned, of the discipline under which the programme resorts or of the institution where the programme is offered. The external review should be laid down in writing in a public report.

The external review should be carried out according to previously communicated quality standards. These quality standards should have been previously issued by an organisation that functions independently from higher education organisations, such as an international association or organisation, the legislative and executive powers of the country or state concerned, the international accreditation organisation itself, an assessment agency recognised by the said accreditation organisation, or an assessment agency that has signed an agreement with the said accreditation organisation in which its independent functioning is stipulated.

The external review should be carried out by an independent panel of experts, consisting of peers and one or more students, unless no candidacy for a student expert was fulfilled and/or student involvement in external reviews concerning the programme, the discipline or the institution is organised in a different way.

Among the experts in the panel, the following expertise should be represented:

- subject-/discipline-specific expertise as to the subject/discipline concerned and the professional practice of that discipline. If relevant, this expertise should relate to the international context of that discipline;
- educational/pedagogical expertise;
- expertise in assessment

Theme 4

The other accreditation organisation has an adequately functioning organisational structure.

The accreditation organisation should be autonomous and should be able to take independent accreditation decisions. In this context, 'autonomous' means that the political authority of the country or state concerned and the institution concerned cannot decisively influence the decision-making process of the accreditation organisation. The fact that an appeal can be lodged against decisions taken by the accreditation organisation, does not imply that the accreditation organisation does not function autonomously. However, a precondition is that an appeal can only lead to adjournment or annulment of a decision. Consequently, lodging an appeal can never lead to another authority taking a positive or a negative accreditation decision. If that were the case, the final accreditation decision would be taken by another (public) body and not by the accreditation organisation, which is a prerequisite for autonomy.

Other accreditation organisations then NVAO that would like to have their accreditation decisions recognised in Flanders should have a functioning and continuous practice in accreditation and should be operating according to a set of distinctive working rules. The accreditation should never be granted ad hoc and the accreditation of programmes should be the major objective (or one of the major objectives) of the accreditation organisation.

As a guarantee for continuity, the accreditation organisation should be recognised by a governmental authority. This recognition can be focussed on the academic and/or professional orientation.

The accreditation organisation should keep in close touch with its stakeholders in higher education in the country or state concerned so as to be up to date where developments in higher education are concerned.

Finally, NVAO verifies whether the accreditation organisation applies and follows an internal quality assurance system.

Theme 5

The other accreditation organisation applies valid quality standards.

The accreditation organisation based outside Flanders should assess in each case the same themes and standards that are assessed in the NVAO accreditation framework. For this reason, the accreditation organisation should be able to demonstrate that it has assessed the following:

- the coherence and relevance of the intended learning outcomes of the specific programme or discipline, or the way this coherence and relevance is guaranteed for the programmes as a whole offered at the institution;
- the coherence of the curriculum of the specific programme or discipline, or the coherence of the curriculum of the programmes as a whole offered at the institution;
- the quality of the staff deployed for the specific programme or discipline, or for the programmes as a whole offered at the institution;
- the quality of the facilities, tutoring and student information provision for that specific programme or discipline provided by the institution or for the programmes as a whole offered at the institution;
- the realisation of an internal quality assurance system as regards the specific programme or discipline or the programmes as a whole offered at the institution;
- the quality of the achieved learning outcomes of the specific programme or discipline, or of the programmes as a whole offered at the institution.

When assessing quality, the accreditation organisation should apply the Dublin descriptors regarding the learning outcomes in higher education or another set of coherent criteria that does not differ substantially from the Dublin descriptors.

The accreditation should give a clear indication as to the professional or academic orientation of the programme.

When assessing a programme, the accreditation organisation should be able to demonstrate to which extent the specific programme or discipline or the programmes as a whole offered at the institution correspond with broadly accepted and well documented subject-/discipline-specific requirements.

4. ACCREDITATION IN THE TRANSITIONAL PERIOD

The essential characteristics of a bachelor or master's programme with academic orientation are that the programme is supported by research and that there is an inter-relatedness between educational contents and research. The first aspect refers to the extent to which staff is involved in research and the second aspect refers to how the students are brought into contact with research. These two aspects are further described in the explanatory notes under 'embedding programmes with academic orientation in research'. The accreditation framework (see Chapter 2.1) refers in the different criteria, standards and themes to the required presence of these aspects in a programme with an academic orientation.

Within the framework of embedding programmes in research, *university colleges'* programmes with two cycles can be converted to bachelor and master's programmes with academic orientation if they work together in an association with a university. However, a number of *university colleges'* programmes with two cycles shall possibly be unable to fulfil the requirements adopted in the assessment framework with reference to the criteria for embedding the programme in research. The difficult process of converting these programmes to full-fledged programmes with academic orientation will take place in the coming years. This gradual process of embedding the educational contents of a programme in research should lead to the programme meeting all the requirements necessary to be considered a programme with academic orientation. This embedment process should be finalised by the academic year 2012 -2013. For the programmes that were accredited based on an external assessment report published after 1 January 2005, a transitional period came into force during which the embedment process should take place. In the period up to 2013, these programmes, contrary to the programmes that already had an academic orientation before, will be assessed less severely where the embedment in research is concerned. As regards all the other standards and themes in the accreditation framework, these programmes (like all the other programmes with academic orientation) should meet all the requirements of the accreditation framework. This conversion process has been laid down by law as a supplement to Clause 124 § 9 in the Flemish Act.

[...]

5. EXPLANATORY NOTES

Points of Departure

Accreditation is the formal recognition of a programme based on a decision by an independent organisation, stating that the programme fulfils predefined requirements regarding quality and level. The decision depends on the satisfactory fulfilment of generic quality standards. By granting a formal quality mark, accreditation is the culmination of the assessment of the quality of programmes. The mark is granted by NVAO after validating an external assessment report drafted by an assessment panel co-ordinated by a quality assessment agency. The subject of accreditation is the programme. The initiative for the application for accreditation lies with the institution.

By signing the Bologna Declaration, all European countries concerned decided to implement an educational model of two cycles in the endeavour for a European Higher Education Area. Linked to this, many countries implemented accreditation systems in order to determine the level and quality of their programmes. In addition, international mobility of students is encouraged.

For Flanders, NVAO was established through a treaty between the Flemish and the Dutch governments. In this treaty the tasks, composition and competence of NVAO are defined. The treaty also regulates how the accreditation framework adopted by NVAO acquires legal force.

NVAO decides separately on the accreditation of bachelor and master's programmes. This does not alter the fact that the assessment of related bachelor and master's programmes can be performed jointly. However, the assessment panel is obliged to give an overall mark – 'satisfactory' or 'unsatisfactory' – on each programme (also separately, therefore, for bachelor and master's programmes or advanced master's programmes).

Accreditation Framework

The Flemish Act and the Accreditation Framework of 14 February 2003 adopted by the accreditation organisation of the Netherlands (NAO) were taken as the point of departure for drafting this accreditation framework. As a consequence of the opinions of the stakeholders consulted, parties endeavoured to achieve the best possible agreement between the Dutch framework and the Flemish framework. However, the Dutch framework was deviated from in those cases where the Flemish Act or differences between Flemish and Dutch higher education made this necessary. In these Explanatory Notes, the Flemish situation is the one referred to, including the themes, standards and criteria of the framework.

Accreditation of programmes is based on an assessment of six themes:

1. Aims and objectives
2. Curriculum
3. Staff
4. Services
5. Internal quality assurance
6. Results

These themes are further subdivided into standards.

The Table below shows how the themes and standards from the accreditation framework fit the generic quality standards from the Flemish Act (Clause 58).

Generic quality standards of the Flemish Act	Accreditation framework (Flanders)
Educational contents: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – educational nature and level – consistency of the programme – workload – correspondence between intended learning outcomes and curriculum 	Aims and objectives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – level and orientation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – bachelor's degree (professional orientation) – bachelor's degree (academic orientation) – master's degree – subject-/discipline-specific requirements Curriculum: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – requirements for professional / academic orientation – correspondence between the aims and objectives and the curriculum – consistency of the curriculum

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - workload - admission requirements - credits
Educational process: harmony between design and contents student counselling insightful evaluation and testing	Curriculum : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - coherence of structure and contents - learning assessment - master's thesis Services: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - tutoring
Material facilities, quality of staff, organisation and internal quality assurance	Staff commitment: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - requirements for professional / academic orientation - quantity of staff - quality of staff Services: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - facilities Internal quality assurance: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - periodical evaluations - measures for improvement - involvement of staff, students, alumni and the professional field
Methods of self-evaluation	Assessment by the assessment panel of the quality of the self-evaluation (including the method applied during the composition)(Chapter 6, 4th point)

Regarding the subdivision of the accreditation framework, the choice of themes, standards and criteria, and the level of abstraction applied, parties sought to fit in with the Dutch accreditation framework as much as possible.

Subject-/discipline-specific framework of reference

Assessment of the programme cannot be based only on general criteria to do with aims and objectives, programme, facilities, staff and internal quality assurance. The programme must be closely examined to determine whether it fulfils the requirements that are demanded by professional colleagues at home and abroad, and by professional practice or practice of the arts for this specific programme and the field of study concerned. In cases of regulated professions, account must be taken of the regulations or rules concerned. The assessment panel must therefore be able to assess both the subject-/discipline-specific quality as well as the general quality of the programme. This calls for specific requirements for the composition of the assessment panel.

In addition, the assessment panel must have at its disposal a subject-/discipline-specific framework in the light of which the programme is assessed. For this purpose, the quality assessment agency draws up a procedure in the assessment protocol. For academically oriented programmes, connection can be sought with national and international developments in the subject/discipline. The Flemish Act stipulates that professionally oriented bachelors must fulfil profession-specific competences and that academic programmes must fulfil specific profession-oriented competences required for independent use of knowledge. These competences must enable the graduate to conduct independent research or to practice the arts independently or to deploy scientific or artistic knowledge independently at the level of a newly-qualified professional. These provisions, as determined by law, form the basis of subject-/discipline-specific frameworks. Without such a framework, a quality assessment agency is unable to assess whether the programme fulfils the requirements demanded of it by the field of study and/or the relevant professional practice. In case there are professional profiles and curriculum profiles available, the quality assessment agency can possibly adopt these, provided these profiles are supported in the professional field and connect with relevant developments in the professional field and in the field of study. The quality assessment agency has to indicate the procedure for drafting a subject-/discipline-specific framework. If need be, insofar as these are sufficiently current and carry sufficient support within the subject/discipline and relevant national and international professional practice, use can be made of frameworks drawn up for the purpose of earlier assessments or of frameworks provided by the programmes. Ultimately, the assessment panel is responsible for establishing a subject-/discipline-specific framework.

Embedding programmes with an academic orientation in research

The essential characteristics of a bachelor or master's programme with an academic orientation are that the programme is supported by research and that there is an inter-relatedness between educational contents and research. Academically oriented programmes should indeed be closely linked to research. In various places in the standards of the accreditation framework, the requirements regarding the link with research are formulated. These requirements refer to:

- the aims and objectives of the programmes (in accordance with the provisions in Clause 58 of the Flemish Act)
- the curriculum (requirements regarding academic orientation, such as the interaction between research and education, the connection with academic developments and current scientific theories, guaranteeing competences in the area of research and the master's thesis)
- the staff (teaching is generally undertaken by researchers who contribute to the development of their subject/discipline)
- the material facilities concerning the research-related infrastructure relevant to education

These requirements apply to all programmes with an academic orientation. Validation of these requirements should be undertaken in the light of the research activities of the staff (including research projects, doctoral research and scientific output). These requirements need to be interpreted differently depending upon the programme (bachelor, master or advanced master's degree) and its position in the curriculum. Thus, as a rule, embedding the programme in research will be more pronounced in the master's programmes than in the bachelor's programmes. The introduction of research competences in the programme will be offered particularly in the master's programme, and will be most pronounced in the master's thesis.

As possible aims and objectives of a master's programme, the Flemish Act mentions, on the one hand, imparting the necessary academic competences that will enable the graduate to conduct independent research or to practice the arts independently at the level of a newly-qualified researcher or artist, and on the other hand, imparting general and specific profession-oriented competences necessary for the graduate to use academic or artistic knowledge independently at the level of a newly-qualified professional.

Depending on the subject-/discipline-specific nature of the programme, the requirements for the programmes will be specified in more detail. Thus, for instance, in the case of the master's programmes that are specifically aimed at training in research (for instance, "research masters"), the subject-/discipline-specific requirements should run parallel with the international standards for such programmes. In addition, in assessing the aims and objectives of these programmes, more weight is given to the acquiring of competences necessary for conducting independent research at the level of a newly-qualified researcher, and stricter requirements are set for embedding the programmes in research. This means that stricter requirements will be demanded regarding, amongst others, the research capacity of the staff and their experience in training newly-qualified researchers, the wider research orientation in the curriculum, the scientific interpretation of the master's thesis, and the connection with current research.

External quality assessment and Accreditation

The point of departure for the accreditation process is that it is a continuation of the external quality assessment. External quality assessment is particularly aimed at improving quality, while accreditation is aimed at assessing whether the requirements for generic quality have been fulfilled, as described in Chapter 2 of this accreditation framework.

VLIR and *VLHORA* are responsible for co-ordinating the external assessment of the statutory registered institutions for higher education. All bachelor and master's programmes organised by these institutions must participate in the assessments co-ordinated by *VLIR* and *VLHORA*. *VLHORA* co-ordinates the external assessment of professionally oriented bachelor's degrees. *VLIR* co-ordinates the external assessment of programmes that are provided by the universities and by the statutory registered institutions that are neither a university nor a *university colleges*. Together *VLIR* and *VHLORA* co-ordinate the external assessment of the academically oriented bachelor and master's programmes that are provided by *university colleges* within the framework of an association, and of the jointly organised academic programmes provided by a university and *university colleges*. The Flemish Act prescribes clustered external assessment of similar programmes [in subject and/or discipline] at all universities or *university colleges* and other statutory registered institutions within the framework of the external quality assessment by *VLIR* and *VHLORA*. Assessment panels carry out the external assessment of the programmes or clusters of programmes. The quality assessment agencies publish the result of the assessment of the programmes in a report adopted and made public by the assessment panel.

The following procedure for accreditation is incorporated in the Flemish Act. NVAO decides to grant the accreditation, if based on the report of an external assessment it is of the opinion that the programme fulfils the generic quality standards. NVAO assesses the report of the quality assessment agency. The report of the quality assessment agency contains a summarised conclusion on whether the programme fulfils the requirements for generic quality as described in Chapter 2 of this accreditation framework.

The external assessment for the benefit of accreditation can be performed by *VLIR*, *VLHORA* or another quality assessment agency recognised by NVAO. Only quality assessment agencies recognised by NVAO may, besides *VLIR* and *VLHORA*, perform external assessments for the benefit of accreditation. For the external assessment for the benefit of the external quality assessment that is performed under the responsibility of *VLIR* and *VLHORA* and used as external assessment for the benefit of the accreditation, the report and the procedure followed must fulfil the requirements set by NVAO.

It is of the utmost importance that the implementation of the accreditation system does not lead to corrosion of the improvement function of the external quality assessment, which may be regarded as an important achievement of the former assessment system. Ensuring the improvement function is the responsibility of *VLIR* and *VLHORA* as part of their task, as is determined by law, to co-ordinate external quality assessment.

Range

Accreditation relates to programmes of statutory registered institutions and programmes of (non-statutory) registered institutions. Accreditation is the precondition for registering a programme in the Flemish Higher Education Register [<http://www.highereducation.be>]. The precondition for an institution to award recognised bachelor and master's degrees is that the programme is registered in the Higher Education Register. For the period 2003—2006, the Flemish Act, in anticipation of a new funding system, foresees individually established "frozen envelopes" [set amounts] for *university colleges* and universities. The Flemish Act foresees that only programmes that are registered in the Higher Education Register will be eligible for funding. It is to be expected that in the future funding system, the funding of programmes offered by recognised institutions will depend on their having attained accreditation.

In the Flemish Act, the possibility is created that besides the statutory registered institutions also new institutions can be registered. These newly (non-statutory) registered institutions can then provide recognised bachelor and master's programmes and award recognised bachelor and master's degrees. The precondition is that the programmes concerned are accredited and that these programmes have been registered in the Higher Education Register. Programmes that are provided by these registered institutions do not have to comply with all the provisions of the Flemish Act, for instance, the language regulation. These (non-statutory) registered institutions are not funded by the government.

Embedding programmes in research

Within the framework of embedding programmes in research, *university colleges'* programmes with two cycles can be converted to academically oriented bachelor and master's programmes in association with a university. No later than the end of the period of *statutory accreditation* (the end of the academic year 2012—2013), all programmes at universities and all academic programmes at *university colleges* must fulfil the same accreditation requirements. These requirements are described in Chapter 2.1 of this accreditation framework.

A number of *university colleges'* programmes with two cycles shall possibly be unable in the short term to fulfil the requirements adopted in this assessment framework with reference to the criteria on embedding the programme in research. To date, these institutions have not had the necessary financial means at their disposal to embed education fully in research. Moreover, within the associations, embedding these programmes in research will still take a number of years. For this reason, it is possible that during the transitional period up to 2013, institutions can request a transitional arrangement for these programmes. This applies to programmes for which the first assessment report was published after 31 December 2004. For these programmes, institutions must submit an application for accreditation within one year after the publication of this report, at a time when the embedment process is still in progress. For these programmes, the extent to which the embedment process has already been realised will be determined strongly by the time of accreditation in the transitional period. The assessment of the embedding of the programmes in research at *university colleges* that are making use of the transitional rule will, in the period up to 2013, be based on the extent to which both the criteria from the accreditation framework as well as the intentions for embedment of the programmes have been realised. This transitional assessment also applies to the academic programmes at the *university colleges* that originate from converting advanced programmes or from converting programmes that were taken over from adult education centres.

In the self-evaluation document, the institution has to indicate to what extent embedment in research is realised and what steps are being undertaken to fulfil the criteria from the accreditation framework at the end of the transitional period. This is reviewed by the assessment panel. In cases where the programme makes use of the transitional arrangement, the accreditation term is reduced to four years provided the institution submits its application for accreditation prior to the end of the academic year 2008-2009, and to six years in cases where the institution submits its application for accreditation between 1 October 2009 and the end of the academic year 2012-2013.

Higher Education in the Arts

There are a limited number of art programmes of one cycle in Flanders that are being converted into professionally oriented bachelor's degrees. In addition, there are programmes with two cycles in the field of the audio-visual and visual arts, and music and performing arts. These programmes are being converted to academically oriented programmes: they must be provided within the framework of an association with a university and must fulfil the requirements that are demanded of bachelor and master's programmes with academic orientation, as formulated in Chapter 2 of this accreditation framework. This means, amongst others, that the programme must be embedded in research and that a major part of the teachers is active in research (in the arts).

Advanced bachelor and master's programmes

For the advanced bachelor and master's programmes, different admission requirements apply than for regular bachelor and master's programmes. For the remainder, these programmes need to fulfil the same quality requirements as other bachelor and master's programmes.

6. EXPLANATORY NOTES BY CHAPTER

Chapter 1: The Structure of the Accreditation Framework

The accreditation framework comprises criteria concerning contents and criteria for the procedure followed and for the report by the quality assessment agency. The status of the criteria for assessing distinctive features of a programme is different from the other criteria because the conclusion about distinctive features does not influence the accreditation.

Chapter 2: Accreditation based on an External Assessment Report

2.1 The Assessment Framework

The assessment framework contains the criteria that NVAO uses to examine whether the programme fulfils the requirements for generic quality.

2.1.1. Aims and Objectives of the Programme

The level and orientation of the aims and objectives of the programme are examined in the light of the learning outcomes for professionally oriented bachelor's degree, academically oriented bachelor and master's programmes as contained in Clause 58 of the Flemish Act. In addition, the aims and objectives are assessed in the light of subject-/discipline-specific requirements that are set by the relevant subject/discipline concerned and/or by the professional practice or practice of the arts. For professionally oriented bachelor's programmes, it applies that the learning outcomes have to be assessed in the light of the relevant professional field in the broadest sense, including the relevant social sector.

2.1.2. Programme

The programmes intended general and subject-/discipline-specific learning outcomes (the knowledge, skills and competences to be attained) must be specified explicitly in the curriculum. The proposed contents and design of the curriculum (including the educational objectives of the programme) must ensure that incoming students can achieve the intended learning outcomes within the set time. The aims and objectives of the programme are assessed through its contents. Professionally oriented bachelor's programmes must accord to relevant developments in professional practice; academically oriented bachelor and master's programmes must accord to developments in the relevant research subjects/disciplines. With the assessment of academically oriented programmes, the question of whether research is embedded in the programme is essential, as is the development of competences in the area of research (including research in the arts). Academically oriented master's programmes aim at imparting competences for independent research or independent practice of the arts at the level of a newly-qualified researcher or artist, and/or aim at imparting profession-oriented competences for independent use of knowledge at the level of a newly-qualified professional. In the latter case, an additional professional orientation is applicable. Therefore, the requirements of the academic bachelor and master's programme include that where applicable the programme must have demonstrable ties with the actual practice of the relevant profession.

The arrangement of the programme is also subject to assessment. It concerns the correspondence between the aims and objectives and the curriculum, the consistency of the curriculum, the workload, the admission requirements, the coherence of structure and contents, learning assessments (including test formats and the information to students about the procedure and the forms of evaluation), and the organisation of the programme. As far as the assessment of the workload is concerned, the correspondence between actual and budgeted study time is also looked into. The standardisation applied in this framework must be seen in the light of the current provisions determined by law. The standards included in the framework correspond to the method of questioning in the current assessments by VLHORA and VLIR. It is assessed whether the programme contributes to the attainment of the aims and objectives. To this end, formulations are used that provide sufficient room for current developments concerning the standards.

The quality of the programme must also be apparent from its connection to the qualifications of incoming students. In this respect the legal admission requirements, and which have been included in the accreditation framework, are important. In addition to fulfilling the formal admission requirements, there must be an effective connection of the programme to the average level of incoming students. In this

respect, the quality of preparatory and transitional programmes will also be assessed. Where the programme is assessed as model trajectory for realising the aims and objectives of the programme, individualised trajectories, flexible learning environments, curricula and educational organisation, and the recognition of prior learning (competences and qualifications achieved elsewhere), are made possible for students by applying the Act regarding Flexible Study Pathways in Higher Education in Flanders. When the occasion arises, these forms of flexible study pathways and supervision regarding study progress and course trajectory are also taken into account in assessing the themes, standards and criteria involved.

2.1.3. Staff

Regarding the criteria for the deployment of staff, it is important that the expertise of the staff employed in the programme³ correspond sufficiently with the level (bachelor or master's degree) and the orientation (academic or professional) of the programme. This is to say that in the case of professionally oriented programmes sufficient staff must be able to draw correspondences with professional practice. In the case of academic programmes, staff must be active in research and the development of the subject. In the academic programmes to which it applies, sufficient staff must possess experience, knowledge and insight into the profession or artistic practice concerned and/or possess international expertise.

The first standard refers to the demands made on the staff given the orientation of the programme (professional or academic). The third standard ('quality of staff') refers to the necessity of the presence of a range of expertisedepending on the aims and objectives of the programme, the educational organisation, and to the corresponding staff development policy.

The standard 'quantity of staff' is not mentioned explicitly in the Flemish Act under generic quality standards⁴. It was included in the accreditation framework because the presence of sufficient staff is an obvious precondition for generic quality.

2.1.4. Services

The services must be in line with the programme. Services include facilities, tutoring and the provision of information to students throughout the length of the course. The provision of information to students and tutoring must be tailored to the requirements of the students. Future students must also be informed adequately about expectations regarding their competences.

The facilities include multimedia libraries, laboratories, equipment, study space or subject-specific databases. The nature and level of these facilities differ with the character of the programme. During assessment, it is judged whether the facilities correspond with the generally prevalent level of quality for such facilities.

2.1.5. Internal quality assurance

The institution must demonstrate that quality is structurally and permanently monitored and improved. The provision of quality assurance is the best guarantee for maintaining and improving the quality established at accreditation.

Involvement, particularly of colleagues and students but also of alumni and the professional field, is a fundamental feature of internal quality assurance. This involvement should be evident from the method of consultation with all parties, their role in decision-making and how their recommendations are incorporated in the programme.

2.1.6. Results

The final decision is based on the realisation of the intended aims and objectives. This is determined by comparing the achieved learning outcomes with the intended learning outcomes for level, orientation and subject-/discipline-specific features. Comparing the achieved learning outcomes with the intended learning outcomes also comprises assessing whether the achieved learning outcomes of the graduates of the programme have sufficient social relevance, as mentioned in Clause 58 of the Flemish Act. The social relevance of the programme is expressed in the aims and objectives of the programme (in particular in the subject-/discipline-specific requirements). The success rates must also be acceptable. Target figures must be formulated in comparison with other relevant programmes in accordance with the regulations contained in the Flemish Act. When formulating the target figures, the requirements demanded of incoming students can also be taken into account, as well as the open entry to higher education for most programmes, and the institution's own emphasis on the distinctive features of the programme. The success rate achieved

³ This does not only refer to the staff deployed by the institution providing the programme, but also includes all persons who contribute to collaborate with the programme regardless of their status.

⁴ This is also the case in the Dutch legislation.

should be indicated in the self-evaluation of the institution in relation to the target figures quoted and the success rate of other relevant programmes.

2.2 Distinctive Quality Features

Besides accreditation aimed at establishing the presence of sufficient generic quality standards, the Flemish Act, Clause 59, also allows the noting in the accreditation report of distinctive features of the programme. In this accreditation framework, the following criteria are included for the purpose:

- the distinctive feature must contribute significantly to making a programme distinct and the emphasis on distinctive features within Flemish higher education; the distinctive feature must lead to greater diversity in the design of programmes;
- the distinctive feature must contribute to the overall quality of the programme; the programme concerned would not be as good without that specific feature (or without all the standards that characterise this feature);
- the effects of the distinctive feature on the quality of education must be made operational; it must be clear what the consequences of the feature are for the aims and objectives, contents and design of the programme and services.

The institution should, prior to the assessment, apply for assessment of the distinctive feature by the quality assessment agency. The institution has to provide the relevant information about the standards of the distinctive feature on the basis of which the quality assessment agency can arrive at a conclusion.

Examples of distinctive features are a pronounced regional or international orientation, a specific bond with research, a distinctive educational concept, or an extremely effective connection to the profession.

2.3 Assessment rules

The assessment panel gives a summarised assessment of the quality of the programme with a positive or negative overall conclusion concerning the presence of sufficient generic quality. NVAO has detailed assessment rules that describe the method by which the assessment panel arrives at this final conclusion. For a positive final conclusion the programme must be rated 'satisfactory' on all themes from the accreditation framework. The assessment panel must provide insight into its considerations at all levels – standards, themes and final conclusions – so that it will be clear how the final conclusion was reached and how the different standards were weighed.

Assessment of the standards is achieved with a four-point scale: 'unsatisfactory', 'satisfactory', 'good' and 'excellent'. The descriptors 'unsatisfactory' and 'satisfactory' are the primary results of the assessment. The rating 'good' shows that the quality rises above the generic quality. 'Excellent' was included in the assessment scale as the rating that exposes "best practices", which can have an exemplary function for other programmes.

Within a theme, individual standards can be rated as 'unsatisfactory'. However, at the theme level, a programme must always earn the mark 'satisfactory'. If certain standards are rated 'unsatisfactory' but the overall theme is rated 'satisfactory', the assessment panel has to provide an explanation of their decision so that NVAO can follow and understand the considerations and assessments.

Many programmes have separate specialisations. Some programmes are provided at more than one location. The accreditation, however, takes place at the level of the entire programme and not at the level of a separate specialisation or location. When a specialisation or location of a programme has insufficient quality, and if the programme obtains an 'unsatisfactory' assessment as a result, then this specialisation or location can be excluded from the accreditation application by the institution involved. Excluding a specialisation or location of a programme from the application for accreditation implies that it can no longer be offered for accreditation.

2.4 Accreditation decision

In its report, the quality assessment agency accounts for the procedure followed during external assessment. NVAO assesses the procedure on the basis of the report by the assessment panel and the assessment protocol of the quality assessment agency. Independence, expertise and authority of the assessment panel convened by the quality assessment agency are the essential factors. The expertise covered concerns expertise in the discipline, expertise in the professional field concerned, expertise in the

field of quality assessment and expertise of educational issues relating to programmes in higher education. NVAO also assesses the procedure as far as the contribution of students is concerned, both during the assessment (were students of the programme interviewed?) and in the composition of the assessment panel.

The assessment panel has to substantiate its conclusions on the basis of the framework used (which also includes the subject-/discipline-specific requirements) and on the analysis of the facts. A comparison of the programme with other programmes, preferably international, must be part of the procedure.

If NVAO concludes that the external assessment has taken place with the utmost care, NVAO takes a final decision on whether the programme offers sufficient quality guarantees.

NVAO may agree with all aspects of the external assessment report. In this case, the report forms the grounds for NVAO's final decision.

However, NVAO can also partly or completely disagree with some or all aspects of the external assessment report. In that case, NVAO's final decision should be based on the assessment rules applied by the assessment agency. NVAO shall then explicitly give grounds for its judgement in the accreditation decision.