

## **Netherlands Quality Agency**

# **Self-assessment Report for External Review against the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)**



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# 1. Introduction

NQA is a Dutch-based quality assurance agency with a clear focus on Universities of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands. Its solid key objective is to assess degree programmes of Universities of Applied Sciences. With this ENQA review NQA wants to show its level of compliance with the ESG standards. In addition to the assessments of degree programmes, NQA offers several other (evaluative) services. Amongst others, this includes research evaluations and the training of Examination Committees and internal quality assurance departments.

This self-assessment report (SAR) is written for the ENQA review to assess NQA's compliance with the ESG standards and to prolong the ENQA membership. In Chapter 2 first the development of this report is described. In Chapter 3 the higher education in the Netherlands is introduced and the Dutch system of external quality assurance is addressed. In the next chapter NQA is introduced and an overview of the NQA's higher education quality assurance activities is given. Subsequently, NQA shows its level of compliance with the ESG standards part 3 in Chapter 5 and for part 2 in Chapter 6. After providing information and opinions of stakeholders in Chapter 7, the follow-up on the findings of the previous ENQA review is given in Chapter 8. Finally, the report concludes with a SWOT analysis in Chapter 9 and an overview of the key challenges and areas for future development in Chapter 10.

## 2. Development of the self-assessment report

For the development of the SAR a team was appointed consisting of the NQA director and one staff member. They started with an evaluation on the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area and discussed how to write the new SAR with taking the previous SAR as starting point. Following this discussion, they divided chapters/parts among each other and realized first drafts

The SAR follows the structure of ENQA's Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews (2021). In several feedback-rounds, the NQA director and staff member shared their input on draft versions of the SAR. As the content of the SAR relies strongly on NQA processes and methods, the input of NQA's staff is embedded in this way. This regards for example the yearly update of the NQA Guidebook for assessments in higher education. The first complete draft of the SAR has been discussed with all staff members and their feedback has been incorporated in the final draft version.

In addition to this document, which describes in detail our methods of working regarding the assessments of degree programmes, internal policy papers and external documents, such as the official assessment framework, have been used. Also, results of several evaluations have been included. The final draft version of the SAR had been checked by the NQA director, before sending it to ENQA.

### 3. Higher education and QA of higher education in the Netherlands

#### 3.1. Higher education in the Netherlands

Higher education in the Netherlands is offered at two types of institutions: research universities and universities of applied sciences. Research universities consist of general universities, universities specialised in Engineering, in Agriculture and the Open University. Universities of applied sciences consist of general institutions and of institutions in a specific field such as Agriculture, Fine Arts and Design or Teacher-Training. Whereas research universities are primarily responsible for offering research-oriented programmes, universities of applied sciences are primarily responsible for offering programmes of higher professional education, which prepare students for specific professions. These programmes tend to be more practice oriented than the programmes offered by research universities.

The figure below shows the structure of the Dutch educational system. The position of the universities (both: research and of applied sciences) is shown in this figure. It shows the four cycles within the higher education system (associate degree, bachelor, master and PhD) as well as the requirements for access to higher education.

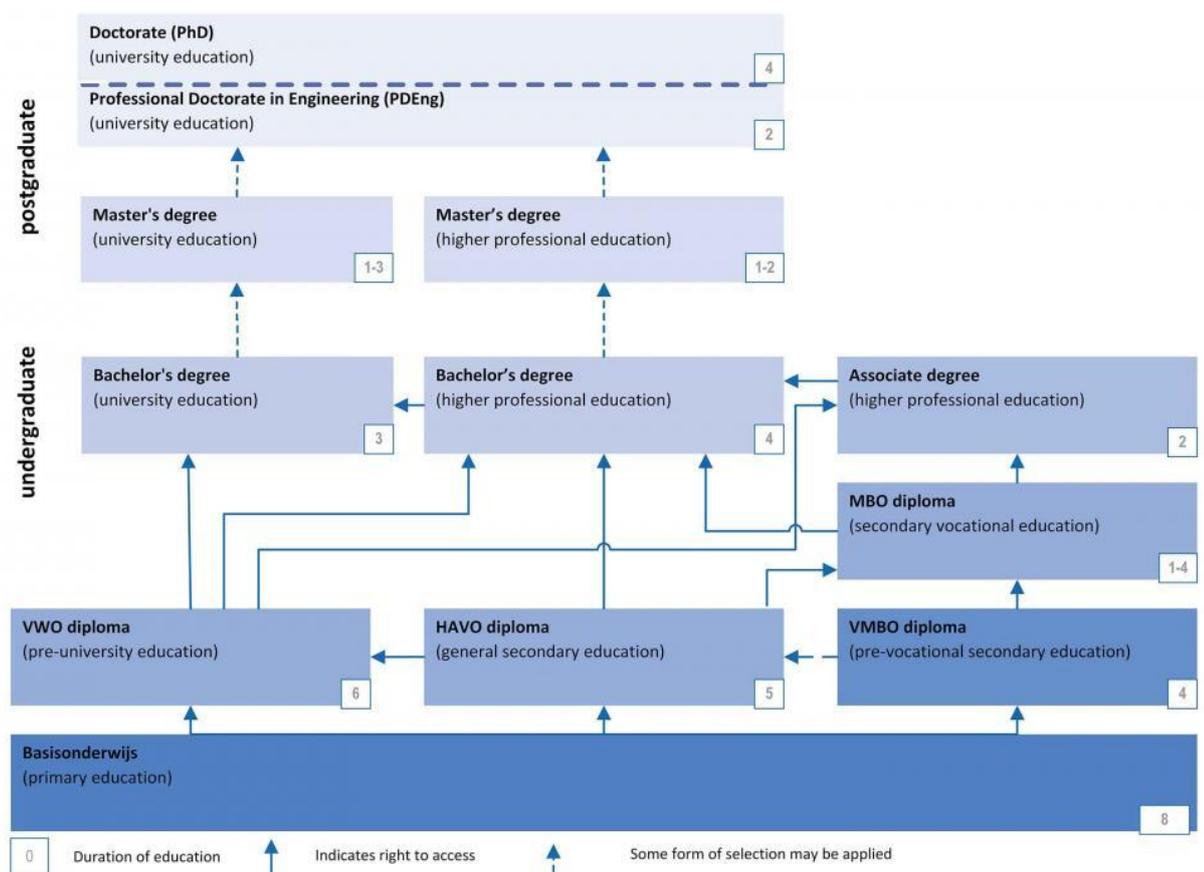


Chart: the Dutch Education system ([Nuffic website](#))

### 3.2. Universities of Applied Sciences

As universities of applied sciences are the main clientele of NQA, it's worth highlighting a few specifics of these universities. As the Chart of the Dutch education system shows, higher professional education is primarily offered by universities of applied sciences. Within higher professional education there are seven sectors: Agriculture & Food, Economics, Health Care, Education, Social studies, Arts and Beta studies such as in Engineering, Logistics, Automotive et cetera. Within these sectors, students can choose various educational profiles.

Higher professional education consists of three cycles. The main cycle lasts four years (240 EC) and students are awarded a bachelor's degree (EQF level 6). The study programme of the main cycle is divided into a *propaedeutic phase* (the first year) followed by a main programme of three years. The fourth year includes a final paper and/or a graduation project. In higher professional education students can also choose to study an Associate degree programme (EQF level 5). This cycle lasts two years (120 EC). After obtaining an associate degree, students may choose whether to enter the labour market or to continue in the main cycle of a corresponding bachelor programme. After obtaining a bachelor degree students may decide to continue in a master degree programme (EQF 7). This cycle lasts one to two years. During a professional master programme, students specialize further in a particular profession. A final paper and/or graduation project emphasising on applied research is part of this programme.

### 3.3. Higher education in numbers

To provide more insight in the higher education landscape, the next table shows the number of institutions (funded) and the number of students registered in 2021 ([Fact and figures universities of applied sciences](#)) ([facts and figures research universities](#)).

Numbers in 2021	Educational institutions (government funded)	Registered students
Universities of Applied Science	36	492.518
Research Universities	13	340.346

As NQA focuses its activities on universities of applied sciences, a further elaboration of the student numbers per degree programme of the past five years is provided below.

Student numbers rounded up to hundreds	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	increase 2017-2021	Per cent
Associate degree	9.000	11.300	14.500	18.100	20.300	11.300	125%
Bachelor's degree	432.600	432.700	436.500	458.500	457.300	24.700	6%
Master's degree	11.900	12.500	13.300	13.800	14.900	3.000	25%
Total	453.500	456.500	464.300	490.400	492.500	39.000	9%

The total number of students registered at universities of applied science increased in the past five years with almost 40,000 students. This increase leveled off in 2021 because of demographic developments. The vast majority of students is registered as a bachelor student, although the number of associate degree students increased significantly in the past five years.

The universities of applied sciences offer in total 391 degree programmes. As these degree programmes can be offered by different universities, the total number of degree programmes offered is much higher. And it must be noted that unfunded programmes, that do not receive money from the government to offer course, are not included in these numbers, while these can also be accredited. The most recent NVAO visitation schedule indicates that almost 1200 bachelor and master degree programmes and almost 170 associate degree programmes are to be re-accredited in the coming years. This leads to a total number of almost 1400 degree programmes to be accredited in the next six years.

### 3.4. System of quality assurance in higher education

#### 3.4.1. Historic context of the system

Before 2002 assessments of degree programmes within higher education were conducted by the Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (in Dutch: the HBO-Raad, now called the Vereniging Hogescholen) and the Association of Research Universities in the Netherlands (in Dutch: the VSNU or Vereniging van samenwerkende Nederlandse universiteiten). Supported by staff members of the associations, the assessments were carried out by panel of experts (peers) who were appointed by the associations. The focus of the assessments was twofold: (1) to verify whether the degree programmes met generic quality standards laid down in an assessment framework (accountability) and (2) to provide advice and recommendations for further improvement of the programmes (quality improvement).

In 2002, the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (In Dutch: Wet op het hoger onderwijs en wetenschappelijk onderzoek (WHW)) <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0005682/2020-01-101> was amended to include accreditation. In the Act, accreditation is described as a quality mark which expresses that the quality of a degree programme has been assessed positively. Accreditation is a condition for receiving public funding and for the right to award legally recognized degrees. At the time, NAO (the Dutch Accreditation Organisation) was established.

NAO received the legitimate power to award accreditation to programmes which fulfilled the conditions laid down in the amended Act. After a short period of time, a decision was made to combine the accreditation of Dutch higher education and higher education in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium). NAO became NVAO, the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation (in Dutch: Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatie Organisatie). NVAO is responsible for the development of accreditation assessment frameworks that serve as a starting point for assessments in the Netherlands and Flanders.

Another consequence of the Act was that external quality assurance was no longer considered to be the responsibility of the higher education sector itself. The quality assurance departments of above-mentioned associations were privatized into independent organisations that continued the assessment activities of the associations. NQA, founded in 2003, originates from the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied sciences. QANU, another quality assurance agency in the Netherlands, emerged from the association of research universities.

This accreditation system, which can be considered a two-tier system, is nowadays still in place. The NVAO decides whether an existing programme is (re-)accredited, but it does not conduct the assessments of the existing degree programmes itself. The assessments are carried out by independent auditors, at the request of the institutions.

#### 3.4.2. Assessment Framework

##### *2003-2011: Start of accreditation*

The first NVAO assessment framework for accreditation dates from 2003. This framework contained 21 standards that were divided into six themes: (1) Aims and objectives of the

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<sup>1</sup> *There is only the actual version of this law available.*

programme, (2) Curriculum, (3) Staff, (4) Facilities, (5) Internal quality assurance and (6) Results. Each of them divided into two or more standards. All degree programmes were assessed on the basis of this framework. The accreditation procedure, laid down in the NVAO's assessment framework, prescribed that institutions of higher education involved a quality assessment agency to assess their degree programmes. According to the framework "accreditation is granted after the NVAO has validated an external assessment, carried out by a quality assessment agency at the request of the institution". The duration of accreditation is six years.

#### *2011: Institutional audit, limited and extensive framework*

Since the introduction of the two-tier system and the above framework, the external quality system was revised twice. Since 2011 higher education institutions can request NVAO to conduct an institutional audit (optional). The institutional audit assesses the educational vision of an institution and the policies for putting this into practice, including human resources and internal quality assurance. A positive result entitles institutions to use a limited framework for the assessments of its degree programmes. This limited framework consisted of three standards: (1) Intended learning outcomes, (2) Teaching-learning environment and (3) Assessment and achieved learning outcomes. If an institution does not apply for an institutional audit, or fails to obtain a positive result, its degree programmes are assessed based on the extensive accreditation framework. The extensive framework consisted of sixteen standards, divided into six themes: (1) Intended learning outcomes, (2) Curriculum, (3) Staff, (4) Services and facilities, (5) Quality assurance and (6) Assessment and achieved learning outcomes. Another change in the system regards the initial accreditation of degree programmes. As of January 2011, initial assessments are carried out exclusively by the NVAO.

#### *2014-2015: Intermediate adjustments*

In the period 2014-2015 intermediate adjustments were made regarding the procedure of accreditation as well as to the assessment framework. These adjustments followed up on several evaluations of the quality assurance system, for example by the Inspectorate and the Ministry of Education. In general, the outcome was positive. In a report to the Dutch Parliament, the Minister of Education qualified the Dutch accreditation system as robust and functioning well. The report praised the expertise of expert panels and the quality of their judgements, just as the quality of the processes, the flexibility and the capacity of self-improvement of the various actors in the process. In addition to the positive findings, several points for improvement were mentioned. These included 'the reduction of the administrative burden', 'the improvement of the consistency, reliability and validity of judgements', 'more flexibility in instrumentation', 'more ownership of quality assurance by teaching staff and students' and 'more trust in the case of proven quality'.

On a system level this led to the introduction of cluster groups and a new visitation schedule to make this possible. Cluster groups are groups of programmes in a similar discipline. The most important change in the assessment framework was the division of the single standard Assessment and achieved learning outcomes into two separate standards: one concerning (the system of) student assessment and the other concerning the achieved learning outcomes.

### *2016: Emphasis on trust and ownership*

After the 2013 evaluations the Ministry installed an advisory group to elaborate on the future design of the external quality assurance system. This advisory group presented its recommendations in a report with the title: 'Tailor-Made Accreditation' (in Dutch: *Accreditatie op Maat*). This 2016 framework came into force in 2017, with a transition period until May 2018. The extensive framework contained the following 11 standards: (1) Intended learning outcomes, (2) Orientation, (3) Content, (4) Learning environment, (5) Intake, (6) Staff, (7) Facilities, (8) Tutoring, (9) Quality assurance, (10) Student assessment and (11) Achieved learning outcomes. The limited framework contained four standards: (1) Intended learning outcomes, (2) Teaching-learning environment, (3) Student assessment and (4) Achieved learning outcomes. As the NVAO states, the framework optimizes existing practices and procedures in order to reduce the administrative burden, to increase the flexibility of the system and give actors more ownership over assessment procedures. The 2016 framework is based on the notion of trust and emphasizes the development of a quality culture. At the same time, it ensures a threshold for basic quality for new and existing programmes.

### *2018: Compliance with 'Accreditatie op maat' and a new judgement scale*

In September 2018 the framework from 2016 was adjusted with a limited number of changes to comply fully with the report 'Tailor-Made Accreditation and with the legal implementation in the Law 'Accreditatie op Maat' <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0041117/2020-04-01>. This framework endorses even more the ownership of the staff and students of the degree programmes and aims to reduce the administrative burden. In addition, this framework introduced a new judgement scale for the standards within the framework. The judgment scale was adjusted from a scale of 'unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good and excellent' to 'Meets the standard', 'Partially meets the standard' or 'Does not meet the standard'. This new judgement scale was also one of the recommendations of the report 'Quality of the Dutch accreditation system 2018' of the Inspectorate [Quality of the Dutch accreditation system 2018](#).

Based on the 2018 framework institutions have the opportunity to participate in the pilot institutional accreditation with a lighter programme accreditation [NVAO: lichtere opleidingsbeoordeling](#). The core of the pilot is that only standards 1 and 4 of the limited framework (standards 1 and 11 in case of the extensive framework) are assessed in accordance with the 2018 framework. Standards 2 and 3 (standards 2 and 10 in case of the extensive framework) are kept out of the judgement.

Also, an additional framework for degree programmes participating in the so called 'Experiment learning outcomes' was introduced in April 2019. In fact, this framework (Protocol Experiment Learning Outcomes) was based on the 2018 framework to be applied on a mid-term review of the degree programmes taking part in this experiment. In this experiment part-time degree programmes do not offer study units but consist of modules as units of learning outcomes. This experiment entails to give part-time students the opportunity to design their personal individual study programme. The duration of the experiment was six years, from 1 July 2016 until 30 June 2022. Both the NVAO and the Ministry of Education published documents after the experiment ([NVAO advice on Experiment learning outcomes](#) [Ministry of Education: Evaluation Experiment learning outcomes](#)). Because NQA has conducted a significant part of these mid-term reviews (196 reviews, corresponding a 60% market share) NQA has published a more practical

evaluation that can encourage programmes for further development

<https://www.nqa.nl/nl/beoordeling/deeltijdonderwijs-aan-de-hand-van-leeruitkomsten>

The midterm-reviews on behalf of the experiment and the regular accreditation of programmes followed a different timetable. To lower the administrative burden of programmes when the midterm-review intervenes closely with the regular accreditation process, the NVAO introduced the 'update audit'<sup>2</sup>

Every time that the discussed framework has updates regarding the accreditation system and the assessments, these changes are translated into the NQA work processes. The NVAO Protocol Experiment Learning Outcomes was not incorporated in our guidebook since it concerned an addition to the existing 2018 framework. Since a limited number institutions participated in this experiment, it was not useful to us a separate guidebook. An additional NQA guidebook would only have been more confusing for the programmes.

The latest NVAO Accreditation Framework from 2018<sup>3</sup> and the adoption of this framework by NQA<sup>4</sup> are added as annexes to this Self-assessment Report.

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<sup>2</sup> NVAO *Accreditatiebeoordeling opleidingen met experimenteerarianten -V11febr21* (see portal 'documenten')

<sup>3</sup> NVAO, (2018), *Assessment Framework for the Higher Education Accreditation System in the Netherlands*

<sup>4</sup> NQA, (2022), *Guidebook for assessments in higher education*

## 4. History, profile and activities of the agency

### 4.1. Brief History of Netherlands Quality Agency

NQA is a quality assurance agency that focuses on providing services to (mainly) institutions for higher professional education in the Netherlands. In particular, NQA conducts assessments of degree programmes on the basis of the formal accreditation assessment framework.

As mentioned before, NQA originates from the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences. In accordance with the amended Higher Education and Research Act (2002), assessments of degree programmes were to be conducted by independent quality assurance agencies. Subsequently, NQA was formally founded in December 2003. NQA is a private organization, since 2008 owned by drs. E. (Eus) Schalkwijk. The director, drs. P.W.G. (Paul) Thijssen, is responsible for the day-to-day management of the organisation.

After the disconnection from the Association of Universities of Applied Sciences, NQA invested in standardizing and automatizing its work processes in order to safeguard an effective and efficient practice. It enabled an assessment approach focused on the content of the degree programmes and its achievements, rather than on procedures and processes. Another transition regards the mentality of the staff members, who were used to work in the context of a monopoly position. As a private organization and the growing competition between assessment agencies over the years, a more service-oriented mindset was needed. This service-oriented mindset, within the boundaries of an independent assessment agency, meant for example that NQA intensified its role to inform institutions and degree programmes on the system of accreditation, the framework and the underlying procedures. All to ensure degree programmes are well-informed on their role and tasks (for example regarding the self-evaluation).

### 4.2. NQA's higher education quality assurance activities

The assessments of degree programmes are NQA's main activity. Next to the assessments NQA conducts several other activities that will be addressed in this chapter. Providing insight in the activities as well as in its frequency stipulates the balance within our portfolio. The strategy of NQA is entirely focused on the Dutch market. We do not aim to expand our activities abroad. Nevertheless NQA has done assessments abroad but within countries where the Dutch framework applies.

#### 4.2.1. Assessments of degree programmes

Accredited degree programmes of higher education institutions need to be assessed once every six years. Every year the NVAO publishes a visitation schedule (last update: november 2022: <https://www.nvao.net/files/attachments/.7132/Visitatierooster-november-2022.xlsx>) containing the cluster groups and establishing the deadline for institutions to submit an assessment report. NQA organises and co-ordinates many of these assessments for universities of applied sciences. For a description on the Dutch accreditation system, the assessment framework and the NQA assessment procedure, see Chapter 3.4 and Assessment Framework<sup>3</sup>.

#### 4.2.2. Research evaluations

The research evaluations are the second most important activity of NQA and this activity has grown in the past years in the number of clients. However, it is only focused on research and does not have a (direct) link to learning and teaching and therefore, does not fall within the scope of the ESG. Yet, the short description below is in place to understand the activities of NQA.

Over the past five years NQA conducted the following number of research evaluations:

year	research evaluations
2021	10
2020	5
2019	4
2018	4
2017	4
Total	27

*Overview research evaluations by NQA, 2017-2021*

Universities of applied sciences conduct applied research activities. Since 2007, these universities as a sector work together to safeguard the quality of this applied research. A protocol on quality assurance of applied research first came into practice in 2009. In 2015 a revised protocol was introduced, and in 2022 the most recent protocol was released, which will be operational in 2023. Installed by the Association of Universities of Applied Sciences, a committee validates the quality assurance system of these universities concerning their applied research: Validation committee quality assurance research (*In Dutch: kwaliteitszorg praktijkgericht onderzoek*) (VKO). A validation by a VKO is valid for six years. Whereas a VKO assesses at the level of the institution, the system of quality assurance prescribes that the universities' research units are assessed by an independent external panel. NQA organises and co-ordinates these research evaluations.

The NQA method of working (process and methodologies) for the research evaluations shows many similarities with the method of working for the assessments of the degree programmes:

- a panel of independent experts (peers) is composed;
- the research unit draws up a self-evaluation report;
- the expert panel visits the research unit (site-visit);
- a report is drawn up by the independent expert panel.

NQA auditors support the expert panels in these assessments.

#### 4.2.3. International degree programme assessments

In the past five years our international assessments have been limited to the assessments of degree programmes in Curaçao, of the University of Curaçao, formerly known as the University of the Netherlands Antilles (UNA). The last (formal) assessments took place in 2018. Our descriptions regarding the assessments of degree programmes throughout this self-evaluation report also apply to these international assessments as these programmes are obliged (by their government) to comply with the Dutch regulations for external quality assurance.

	# Assessment	Degree programmes
2018	1	1 degree programme

The international assessments of degree programme assessments concern the assessments of degree programmes in Curaçao. The processes and methodologies described in chapter 4.2.1 apply to these assessments.

#### 4.2.4. Assessments for professional associations

NQA also has developed assessment frameworks for professional associations. Some of these associations have the ambition to improve the quality assurance of educational programmes. NQA developed frameworks for these programmes of secondary vocational and higher education that are not recognised by the Dutch government. The frameworks are also developed for in-company programmes to formalize the workforce professionalisation of association members. Through these frameworks, transparent, correct and valid assessments are conducted considering the terms of references. The assessment criteria differ from the NVAO-framework but are partially based on it. In addition to developing these frameworks, NQA is also going to conduct assessments based on these developed frameworks. The assessments of programmes at the level of higher education in this regard are related to NQA's higher education quality assurance activities. It was agreed in the Terms of Reference of this external review that these activities do not fall under the scope of the ESG.

#### 4.2.5. NQA hallmark for study programmes

In addition to full degree programmes assessments, NQA also offers assessments of components of study programmes such as minors, courses and tracks. A certificate for these study routes is an education hallmark. The hallmark can contribute to gain the confidence of the target group in the (educational) quality of the course and supports continual quality improvement. The NQA's assessment will be based on the national applicable assessment frameworks, but also take into consideration the standards relevant to the programme/institution itself as well as the demands of external stakeholders.

#### 4.2.6. Certification of internal audit processes

Based on the existing internal quality assurance system of an institution and the applicable external assessment framework, NQA offers to conduct assessments on the internal audit process of the institution. A positive outcome of this assessment could lead to a certificate of NQA. The assessments focus on the quality of the audits within an institute, gaining insight in the quality of this internal process. Over the past five years NQA has not conducted a certification of internal audit processes.

Regarding both last-mentioned services of NQA (4.2.5 and 4.2.6), the processes and methodologies are developed on the job suiting the demands of the client. As no practice is available for the certification of internal audit processes, NQA cannot show evidence of applied processes and

methodologies on this activity. NQA considers both to be custom-made activities, which need to be tuned to the needs of an institution/study programme.

#### **4.2.7. Other NQA activities**

Our knowledge about assessments/audits in higher education and about higher education in general is valuable to us and is respected in the sector. Attracted by this knowledge, educational institutions and other parties contact us for consultancy services. Sometimes this leads to a contract between NQA and the other party to provide a consultancy service. Providing training is the largest component within our consultancy services. Occasionally, NQA organises trainings/workshops for exam committees and trainings/workshops for internal auditors. The workshops for exam committees are related to higher education. The workshops place a special emphasis on ensuring the quality of tests and exams. In the workshops NQA explains how, by adopting an efficient and practical approach, can be complied with the requirements of the Higher Education and Research Act.

The workshops/training of internal auditors partially regard institutions of higher education. In the past period NQA organised a couple of workshops for internal auditors of NHL University of Applied Sciences in Leeuwarden, the University of Applied Sciences, and for internal auditors of institutions for senior secondary vocational education and training.

In addition to the trainings/workshops, and development of assessment frameworks, NQA occasionally conducts other types of consultancy services. These include preparational audit/ training for the institutions that want to undergo an institutional audit or for degree programmes, guiding institutions which want to obtain the official status of an institution for higher education, and contributions at conferences on quality assurance.

## 5. Profile, functioning and (EQA) activities of NQA (compliance with Part 3 of the ESG)

In this chapter and in the following one, NQA describes to what extent the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) apply to the system of external quality assurance in the Netherlands in general and to NQA's position and activities within that system. The main focus in these chapters is on the NQA activity 'assessments of degree programmes'. These descriptions also apply for our international assessments (Curaçao), as they are bound by the same regulations and procedures. These two activities fall within the scope of the ESG and are included in the ToR. Beyond of the scope of this review, but useful for an adequate overview of the activities of NQA are the activities mentioned in chapter 4.

### 5.1. ESG Standard 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance

*Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities as defined in Part 2 of the ESG on a regular basis. They should have clear and explicit goals and objectives that are part of their publicly available mission statement. These should translate into the daily work of the agency. Agencies should ensure the involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work.*

#### All NQA activities

It is NQA's key objective to conduct assessments of degree programmes of universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands. It is clear that these assessments are within the ESG scope. In the past five years (2017- 2021) NQA performed 423 assessments to evaluate a total of 561 degree programmes (associate degree, bachelor and master). The following table presents an overview of the assessments of degree programmes carried out by NQA since 2017.

Year	degree programmes	limited framework	extensive framework	AD	Bachelor	Master
2021	123	100	23	15	88	20
2020	98	90	8	8	82	8
2019	136	124	12	23	104	9
2018	98	91	7	5	84	9
2017	106	84	22	7	79	20
<b>Total</b>	561	489	72	58	437	66

*Overview assessments of degree programmes by NQA, 2017-2021*

As the table indicates, the number of degree programmes assessed per year vary because of the visitation schedule with an uneven distribution of the degree programmes to be assessed. The table also shows that the limited framework (see 3.4.2.) is the predominant type of assessments and that most of the assessments executed concern bachelor's degree programmes.

NQA wants to emphasize that it strictly separates its external quality assurance activities (such as assessment of degree programmes and research evaluations) from more consultancy-like services (see chapter 5.3).

It is the mission of NQA 'to contribute to the continuous improvement of the quality of education regarding primary education, secondary education, senior secondary vocational education and training, higher education (professional and research) and company training'. The mission is

converted in our plan Ambitions 2023-2028 and actualized in our annual management review. Based on the annual review, tasks for the coming year are defined and assigned (see chapter 8.2.1 and Chapter 10). Based on the number and quality of the performed assessments of degree programmes in higher education and the other activities, NQA feels it works within the scope of its mission, in which the increase in research evaluations is very positive. Unfortunately, efforts to obtain a stronger position in other (educational) sectors, have not led to the desired effect, besides the promising activities for professional associations. Therefore, our focus stays on the universities of applied sciences and hopefully we can obtain a position within more professional associations in the future. At the moment a strong collaboration with one professional association is being developed. In 2022 the agency that conducted nearly 95% of the degree assessments within research universities went bankrupt. It is still difficult for NQA to obtain a position within the research universities, because we had not been able to take over the above-mentioned agency and the research universities still want only auditors with elaborate experience in assessments of programmes within research universities. In the autumn of 2022, NQA will look in depth into the possibilities of obtaining a position within the research universities.

#### *Involvement of stakeholders in governance and work*

The involvement of stakeholders in our governance and work is organized in several ways. NVAO, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science as well as the Inspectorate of Education, are involved in a rule-setting manner. Their legislation on accreditation and the underlying established assessment framework are the starting point for our role in the system of external quality assurance regarding the quality of the degree programmes. On an annual basis NQA meets with NVAO to discuss the external quality assurance system and the (practical) translation to our daily work (processes). There is also, but irregular, a meeting with the other quality agencies, but this has no formal status whatsoever. Because legislation has assigned individual independent secretaries as the main stakeholder for NVAO, professionalisation meetings are frequently organized with secretaries to discuss the way assessments can and should be conducted. This puts NQA further away as stakeholder for NVAO. The ties between NQA and the Ministry and the Inspectorate are almost non-existing..

The universities of applied sciences are our main stakeholders. The NQA director, who also manages most accounts, discusses the developments regarding the assessment framework with them. The involvement of our main stakeholders is intense and of a continuous nature. Every assessed programme is requested to give feedback on our performance via a feedback form. This written feedback is analysed and is combined with the evaluation given by the NQA auditors. Also, the auditors evaluate every individual panel member who was involved in an assessment. All this information is combined and discussed with the main stakeholders. Recently an annual online evaluation with panel members was implemented to receive their feedback on our performance and procedures<sup>5</sup>. NQA is convinced that in this way the involvement is more continuous, flexible and direct than in a formally organised committee. Above all, in this way our clients are directly involved in our governance and work. The collected information is used for the annual update of NQA 'Guidebook Audit Visits in Higher Education'. This guidebook gives an overview of the assessment process and describes the underlying steps more in depth. Furthermore, it provides guidelines for the composition of the self-evaluation report and examples of site-visit schedules. As the 2018 framework is based on the notion of trust and emphasizes the ownership of institutions and degree programmes, NQA chooses not to impose a definite assessment approach. NQA takes on a more inviting position. In

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<sup>5</sup> NQA, (2022), *Feedback meeting panel members*

practice this means that the NQA account managers and (later) the NQA auditors discuss a fit-for-purpose approach with and for each (type of) degree programme, taking into consideration the boundaries of the assessment framework.

### Evaluation

NQA has formulated its mission and works accordingly, although it wishes to align its activities a little more with the broader scope (other educational sectors) included in its mission. Given its position as an assessment agency within the system of external quality assurance, NQA is bound by the formal frameworks that serve as a starting point for degree programmes assessments, but also for other activities, such as the research evaluations. Subsequently, NQA has aligned its processes tightly with these frameworks. The stakeholder involvement of our clients is solid and broad. This involvement is intense on an operational level and has shifted from the involvement on executive board level to the programme management and staff. With respect to NVAO, NQA has been put at a distance like the other assessment agencies. It is the opinion of NQA and of the other assessment agencies that they could be included more in discussions that address the (further) development of the Dutch accreditation system. At the moment the experiences of the assessment agencies in assessing of degree programmes are not fully utilized.

## **5.2. ESG Standard 3.2 Official status**

*Agencies should have an established legal basis and should be formally recognized as quality assurance agencies by competent public authorities.*

Since 2011, the formal position of assessment agencies (such as NQA) has been eliminated from legislation (Higher Education and Research Act) and the NVAO assessment frameworks. A formal official status in that sense is now absent and not strictly necessary, as the NVAO is the formal decision-taking body with regulatory effect. Contracted by institutions, assessment agencies or individual certified secretaries carry out the assessments that form the basis for that decision.

Nevertheless, in practice the position of assessment agencies in the system of external quality assurance has changed only slightly. Still most degree programme assessments are carried out by one of the assessment agencies. Three educational institutions take part in a pilot of institutional accreditation with lighter programme assessments and a few institutions are experimenting with independent secretaries. NVAO takes the NQA reports as crucial input for their accreditation decisions. Our reports are published on the NVAO website, together with their formal decision. The summaries of our reports are adopted as body (text) for the NVAO decision.

NQA was surprised by the decision in 2011 to remove the assessment agencies from legislation. In time the term 'assessment agencies' has also been faded out from the assessment framework. This removal can be seen as an attempt by the authorities to stimulate the ownership of institutions of the assessments. Mentioning agencies in their policies could imply that agencies have a preferred position in the accreditation system, while in fact, institutions can organise their own external assessments as long as they meet the NVAO criteria.

To guide the assessments, NQA works with a team of internal and external auditors. They function as auditors, who safeguard that panels assess degree programmes according to the prevailing assessment framework. All NQA auditors, both internal and external, comply with the NVAO guidelines for secretaries ([Dutch: NVAO guidelines registration secretaries](#)).

### Evaluation

Although the formal status of assessment agencies has changed, their factual position in the system of external quality assurance has not changed. From the perspective of the institutions/degree programmes, the authority of the assessment agencies, such as NQA, has not been affected. NQA does feel that by eliminating the formal status, the opportunities for NVAO and other relevant authorities to verify the quality of the assessment agencies has been limited. NQA considers this a risk in the system of external quality assurance and feels some sort of certification of the assessment agencies could contribute to sustain the enforcement of a level playing field. NQA has advocated this in its consultations with NVAO. It is, therefore, to be regretted that this was not strengthened in the framework 2018, and even is reduced by emphasising the involvement of individual secretaries. Emphasising the role of individual secretaries leads to more fluctuations and variations in the work quality and has already led to discussions about the independent position of individual secretaries.

### **5.3. ESG Standard 3.3 Independence**

*Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence.*

#### Organisational independence

The independence of NQA is our key asset as an assessment agency. NQA has no organisational, or operational ties with any of the institutions it conducts assessments for. Our procedures and the outcomes of our assessments of degree programmes and research evaluations are solely based on our own expertise.

#### Operational independence

NQA ensures that all assessments are carried out by independent panel members, supported by independent NQA auditors. All panel members and NQA auditors sign a declaration of independence prior to the assessment. By signing this, they declare that in the past five years they have not maintained any (family) connections or ties of a personal nature or as a researcher/teacher, professional or consultant with the institution, which could affect a fully independent judgement regarding the quality of the programme. This is compliant with the NVAO regulations.

Furthermore, none of the panel members or the auditors involved are included in the acquisition process leading up to the contract/agreement of NQA with the institution that offers the degree programme. In the process of composing the panels, NQA checks possible conflicts of interest by screening the resumes of potential panel members. The independence of the panel (and the auditor) is also a focus point of NVAO, which formally approves the installation of the panel. In addition, the

independent position of the panel is strengthened by the avoidance of financial ties between the institution and the panel. All payments (fees and expenses) are regulated by NQA. This prevents that members of the panel feel commitment towards the institution. Furthermore, during the assessments the NQA auditors are also keen on detecting possible conflicts of interest which, in the worst case, could lead to withdrawal of a panel/member. Fortunately, our safeguards prior to the assessment have prevented such rigorous measures.

As NQA also provides consultancy services to institutions for higher education, a strict separation from the external quality assurance activities is applied. The above-mentioned measures safeguard the independence. In addition, NQA would like to point out that none of our staff members can be involved in a consultancy project for a degree programme and function within an assessment project for the same programme. These activities are strictly separated by division between persons.

#### Independence of formal outcomes:

The independence of formal outcomes is guaranteed by the Assessment Framework for the Higher Education Accreditation System of the Netherlands. The responsibility for the formal outcomes is the responsibility of the panel and is ratified by the NVAO. The role of the secretaries of NQA and our organisation is to safeguard the accreditation process so that the panel members act within the boundaries of the framework in an appropriate manner to realize correct and independent outcomes. The safeguards mentioned under the organisational and operational independence are essential in realizing independence of the formal outcomes.

#### Evaluation

As independence is a key asset to NQA, NQA has put procedures in place that safeguard this accordingly. The expertise of independent panel members is the sole base for the realisation of our assessments of degree programmes and our research evaluations. All staff and panel members are screened beforehand and sign a declaration of independence.

### **5.4. ESG Standard 3.4 Thematic analysis**

*Agencies should regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities.*

In the Dutch accreditation system, NVAO is the designated body to conduct thematic analyses. As mentioned before, NVAO decides on the accreditation of all degree programmes, based on the peer-reviews reports of the assessment agencies. It should be noted that usually multiple assessment agencies are involved in the assessments of degree programmes within a specific group or domain. This means that generally no single assessment agency has the complete overview of these assessments. Only NVAO has the overview of all conducted assessments and is in the ideal position to compose thematic analyses. Despite this position, such thematic analyses are scarce. A few examples are the analysis of the special feature 'Small-scale and intensive education' awarded in the period 2012-2020 and the advice to the Ministry of Education concerning the 'Experiment learning outcomes'. Furthermore, the NVAO's annual reports contain

full overviews of all decisions taken based on the peer-review reports of the assessment agencies, such as NQA.

As NQA is commissioned by the institutions/degree programmes, their demand regarding the assessment process is leading. As for most institutions and degree programmes the assessment already is an intensive process, the demand for additional services (such as thematic analysis) is almost absent, partly because these additional services are not financed. In 2019 NQA on request of three bachelor programmes Midwifery carried out a thematic analysis<sup>6</sup>. As mentioned above, these thematic analyses are on demand and regrettably rare so NQA cannot plan, only stimulate, these analyses.

Despite of the fact that NQA is a profit organisation and our clients do not want to pay for thematic analysis NQA has done several thematic analysis (see also chapter 8.2.4 which shows three thematic analyses and several activities in this respect in which NQA is involved.

For multiple universities of applied sciences, NQA organizes (yearly) lectures on the most recent developments/analysis and to share our experiences regarding the assessment procedures. Two to four times a year (on average) NQA is invited to meetings of visitation groups, to inform the participating degree programmes on their upcoming accreditation process.

### Evaluation

Regarding the degree programme assessments, NVAO is the designated body to conduct thematic analysis. NQA feels it has a modest role as an unfunded body regarding this standard of the ESG. The system of accreditation offers the opportunity to carry out thematic analyses and in practice various analyses have been executed; mostly by NVAO. As, in NQA's opinion, these thematic analyses stimulate the learning effect of all carried out degree programme assessments, NQA would welcome further use of this instrument by NVAO. Having said this, from the perspective of the context in which NQA operates, it has done several thematic analyses in the past years (section 8.3) and at the same time participated in a few thematic analyses of others, for example the report 'Quality of the Dutch accreditation system 2018' of the Inspectorate [Quality of the Dutch accreditation system 2018](#).

## **5.5. ESG Standard 3.5 Resources**

<i>Agencies should have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out their work.</i>
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### Financial resources

NQA is an independent, private organisation and thus does not receive any form of funding from the Dutch government or other governmental institutions or organisations. Our financial resources depend on the fees we receive for the assessments of degree programmes and our other activities. As a result, our revenues are strictly connected to the number of assessments/assignments we

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<sup>6</sup> *Rapportage sectorthema Opleidingen Verloskunde (see portal 'documenten')*

acquire and carry out. As our solid key activity is the assessment of degree programmes, our annual financial figures are highly influenced by the visitation schedule, which is regulated by NVAO. In the last six years and beyond the financial resources have been adequate and solid as our annual accounts show<sup>7</sup>.

### Human resources

The composition of our workforce has been relatively stable in its size over the past 3 years. It consists of a secretariat of three committed team members, a team of seven internal auditors, a flexible group of five to seven external auditors and the director. Our project calendar is leading for decisions on recruitment of new staff members. Every new (internal) staff member follows the NQA introductory program<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, our quality assurance policy (see also chapter 5.6) ensures all staff members have a performance evaluation once a year. These evaluations are meant to reflect on the activities of the staff member of the past year and look forward to the year to come. Furthermore, the performance evaluations are focused on professional development. This leads to specific activities related to professional development, in accordance with the ambitions of NQA, like activities focused on reporting skills or on new educational concepts like design based education. The last ISO-2015 audit resulted in an explicit compliment in how NQA coaches new staff members. Because of recent fluctuations in the number of staff, the workload of the staff members has been intense. These fluctuations together with Covid-19 could have worked out negatively on the quality of our work, but they did not. The average client satisfaction improved in 2021 from 7.6 to 8.4 on a scale of one to ten.

At this moment NQA is looking for two new staff members, because next year one staff member will retire, and the NVAO-schedule of assessments has been changed (see chapter 8.2.5). This schedule was announced in June 2022 and NQA has translated this schedule in a projection of our workload and financial consequences over the period of 2023-2025.

One of our internal auditors co-ordinates the external auditors. In addition, our secretariat is available to them for support.

### Evaluation

NQA has a solid financial basis and a committed and competent team, which is adequate and appropriate for carrying out its activities. The visitation schedule highly influences our project calendar and will be more stable in the 2023-2025 period. This schedule makes it easier to maintain a consistent quality of our work, a stable amount of work for our staff members and less use of external auditors.

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<sup>7</sup> *The financial results of NQA over the period 2017-2021 (see portal 'documenten')*

<sup>8</sup> *Inwerkprogramma auditoren (see portal 'documenten')*

## 5.6. ESG Standard 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

*Agencies should have in place processes for internal quality assurance related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of their activities.*

The system of internal quality assurance is set out in NQA's 'Quality Management document'<sup>9</sup> which addresses all its activities. This document reflects that the assessments of degree programmes are the key activity of NQA.

NQA's system of internal quality assurance is structured around the components of the ISO 9001 and INK-systems and addresses: 'leadership' (mission, vision, goals), 'staff', 'resources', 'products, service, projects and processes', 'measuring and analysis' and 'continual improvement'. NQA organises at least two internal audits every year, connected to these topics and our goals (targets) related to them. Our evaluation calendar ensures that every topic is addressed every three years. Every year an external ISO-certified audit takes place for the extension of our ISO-certification. In the last audit (2022) seven strong points, no non-conformities and only one observation were identified.

As a result of our quality management, our daily processes include an extensive, valuable number of evaluative activities (checks & balances) that safeguard the quality and integrity of our work. The overview below highlights a few important elements of our internal quality assurance system, including its results:

### Evaluation of degree programme assessments

After every degree programme assessment, the programme receives an evaluation form. This form generates feedback on various aspects of the assessment procedure. It concerns (1) the cooperation with the NQA auditor, (2) the site-visit, (3) the functioning of the expert panel and 4) the panel report. It concludes with the question to give a grade for the performed assessment. In general, the results show that our clients are highly satisfied with our assessments. During the past five years the average score on a 10 points-scale varied between 7,6 (2018) and 8,4 (2021). Based on the comments in the evaluation forms we feel that the NQA approach (focus on content of the programme) is acknowledged and that the cooperation with the auditors is a strong element. In addition, we conclude that our work processes contribute to the satisfaction of our clients. The collaboration with NQA staff and auditors is appreciated for their open communication and for their quick, flexible responses. The panel visits are carried out well in a positive, development-oriented atmosphere. The panel members are valued for their expertise and professionalism. Finally, the assessment reports are found to be clear and well readable.

### Evaluation by auditors

The auditors of NQA fill out two types of evaluations after conducting a degree programme assessment. First, they fill out a project evaluation. The outcomes of these evaluations are input for

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<sup>9</sup> NQA, (2020) *Kwaliteitsmanagementsysteem*

further development of our method of working and are also input for the account managers for their consultations with the institutions. Secondly, they evaluate the members of the expert panels individually. This is input for auditors who work with them in the future and is also valuable input for the composition of future expert panels.

#### Evaluation by account managers

At least once a year the account manager meets with institutions representatives to evaluate the projects conducted that year. On a more strategic level and with the input of the above-mentioned evaluations, the account managers evaluate the cooperation between the institution/programmes and NQA. In the last six years these evaluations have become less formal and more dynamic during on-the-job interactions. This is not something NQA initiated but is a consequence of the fact that our clients have delegated these evaluations more to programme management. NQA regrets this shift to programme management but it has no consequences in that we are still well informed, because of the other evaluations and the information from the more dynamic interactions. The results of all these evaluations can lead to a more specific approach, tuned to the wishes of the institution, but respecting the relevant frameworks. These dynamic consultations are also an important platform to discuss developments in the accreditation system and the implications for future assessments.

#### Safeguards in the assessment procedure

To safeguard the quality and the integrity of the assessments, NQA has implemented various checks & balances in its assessment procedures. These include:

- The '*NQA Guidebook for audit visits in higher education*' and the '*NQA Manual for panel members*' provide guidance for the execution of the assessments for the degree programmes/institutions and the panel members. These documents support sound and intercomparable assessments;
- A written instruction for the chairs how to give adequate feedback on the provisional results of the site visit<sup>10</sup>
- Checks that concern the expertise and the independence of the panel members (for further information, see 5.3, ESG 3.3);
- Formats and templates as working documents for the auditors;
- Flow charts describing the standard processes of NQA, quotation, panel composition, assessment of degree programmes etc.;
- A meeting of the auditor with the degree programme to ensure the procedures are clear;
- A validation of the information file;
- A preliminary meeting with the panel members before the site-visit. In addition to instructing/training the panel members, this meeting is meant for a (first) exchange of impressions of the degree programme between the panel members, based on the self-evaluation report and the appendices. The auditor gives special instructions to the chair of a panel if he/she chairs for the first time;
- Based on the 'four eye-principle' every final draft report of an assessment of a degree

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<sup>10</sup> NQA, (2018), *Richtlijnen Terugkoppeling*

programme is co-read by a colleague auditor of NQA. In this process the colleague auditor checks if the findings and considerations laid down in the report add up to the conclusions. If necessary, a third co-reader will be included in this process. Our procedures also ensure that the degree programmes receive a draft version of the report for pointing out factual inaccuracies.

### Evaluation

NQA feels its procedures for internal quality assurance are highly appropriate. This also becomes clear in our ISO-results. It leads to improvements in our method of working, but also contributes to the fine-tuning of our procedures, processes and underlying documents.

### **5.7. ESG Standard 3.7 Cyclical external review of agencies**

<i>Agencies should undergo an external review at least once every five years in order to demonstrate their compliance with the ESG</i>
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It is NQA's ambition to be subject of an external ENQA agency review once every five years in order to demonstrate our compliance with ESG. In 2018 NQA was reviewed for the first time by ENQA. This SAR is written for the external review scheduled in 2023. Besides this external review, NQA has an annual ISO-2015 audit that contributes highly to our 'organisational hygiene' and therefore, to the compliance with the ESG.

## 6. Design and implementation of the agency's EQA activities (compliance with Part 2 of the ESG)

### 6.1. ESG Standard 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance

*External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG.*

The Dutch system of accreditation reflects the institutions' responsibility for the quality of their programmes. The system in itself reflects this consisting of the institutional audit combined with limited or extensive assessments (if there is no or not a positive result of an institutional audit) of the degree programmes. It assumes that institutions in general and degree programmes in particular organise effective periodic feedback that supports the achievement of the intended learning outcomes. The outcomes of evaluations/feedback should demonstrably constitute the basis for development and improvement.

The elements of ESG Part 1 are more explicitly embedded within the 2018 NVAO Assessment Framework. This becomes clear in the table below, which shows which standards within the assessment frameworks (2018) cover the respective aspects and elements of part 1 of the ESG: ([SAR NVAO 2022](#)).

ESG Part 1 (standards)	Institutional audit (standards)	Limited Framework (standards)	Extensive Framework (standards)
<b>1. Policy and procedures for quality assurance</b>	1 and 2	* (means covered within institutional audit)	9
<b>2. Design and approval of programmes</b>	1 and 2	1 and 2	1, 2, 3, 4 and 9
<b>3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment</b>	1 and 2	1, 2, 3 and 4	1, 2, 3, 4, 10 and 11
<b>4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification</b>	2	1, 2 and 4	1,2, 5, 9 and 11
<b>5. Teaching staff</b>	2	2	6
<b>6. Learning resources and student support</b>	2	2	7 and 8
<b>7. Information management</b>	3 and 4	*	9
<b>8. Public information</b>	2	2	8
<b>9. Ongoing monitoring and periodic review of programmes</b>	3 and 4	*	9
<b>10. Cyclical external quality assurance</b>	3 and 4	*	9

### Evaluation

Part 1 of the ESG is well integrated in the Dutch system of accreditation, i.e., in the frameworks for the assessments at an institutional level and at the level of the degree programmes. Compliance with part 1 of the ESG is primarily the responsibility of the institutions and its degree programmes. As an assessment agency within the system of external quality assurance, NQA assesses the way these aspects are embedded in the degree programmes. On this 'system level' it is clear how the standards of part 1 (ESG) are embedded in the Dutch Assessment Framework. In practice, panel members as well as institutions/degree programmes are aware of the ties between the two (see also chapter 8.3.1). It is possible to expand our manual with the table explaining these ties, but NQA is convinced that this will only result in unnecessary confusion.

## **6.2. ESG Standard 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose**

*External quality assurance should be defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it, while taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement.*

The structure of the accreditation system and the assessment framework consist of an institutional audit and separate assessments of degree programmes. Institutions that hold a positive or conditionally positive decision regarding its institutional audit can use the limited framework for their assessments of degree programmes. In all other cases, the extensive framework is prescribed. The institutional audit intends to reduce the administrative burden of the accreditation process. NQA expresses its opinion to NVAO on the development and revision options for the accreditation and assessment framework.

The NVAO 2018 Assessment Framework for degree programmes has been established following consultations with the umbrella organisations for publicly funded and private universities, universities of applied sciences, quality assessment agencies, student organisations, employers' organisations, with input from many parties involved in educational practice. The adjustments made are limited compared to the previous framework of 2016. The standards to be met by degree programmes remained virtually unchanged. The aim to reduce the administrative burden remained as also the aim to endorse staff and student ownership of the degree programmes. An important feature of the 2018 framework is the introduction of binary, undifferentiated conclusions. Panels are requested to assess degree programmes as either (conditionally) positive or negative. Also, the introduction of accreditation for an indefinite period for existing programmes contributes to the reduction of administrative burden. NVAO determines, based on an assessment report, whether a programme will retain its accreditation. In the event of shortcomings that can be remedied within two years, NVAO will award conditional accreditation.

In the 2018 Assessment Framework, the auditor plays a larger role in the preparation of the panel and the monitoring of the visitation process. NQA ensures on a project level that the NQA auditors execute a fit-for-purpose assessment approach, with the 'NQA Guidebook' (based on the prevailing

framework) as a solid starting point. In a coordination meeting with representatives of the degree programmes the auditor discusses for example the schedule for the site-visit and the required documentation to tune the design of the assessment to the characteristics of the degree programme (see also: chapter 4.2). Furthermore, the auditor monitors if the assessment process is compliant with the assessment framework.

### Evaluation

NQA consequently adopts the continuous development of the assessment framework of the NVAO and translates the changes into its work procedures (for example: yearly update of our Guidebook). It is clear that the external quality assurance for degree programmes takes the relevant regulations as laid down in the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW) as its starting point. Efforts are made to ensure that the methodologies applied are fit for purpose. It should be noted that NQA feels this is a continuous and ongoing process. NQA aims to contribute to an even more fit-for-purpose system of external quality assurance. On a project level the coordination meeting with representatives of the degree programmes ensures a fit-for-purpose assessment approach. Regularly, the director and auditors of NQA make clear to programmes that the framework is very open and there are a lot of possibilities for programmes to organize an inspiring assessment, for example programmes can address specific topics, address the standards during the site visit based on the student journey, mix conversation groups etc. During our site visit our secretaries can give many examples how site visits are organized. They often choose certainty instead of searching along the boundaries of the framework to make it more inspiring.

### **6.3. ESG Standard 2.3 Implementing processes**

*External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. They include:*

- *a self-assessment or equivalent;*
- *an external assessment normally including a site visit;*
- *a report resulting from the external assessment;*
- *a consistent follow-up.*

As laid down in the 2018 Assessment Framework, as well as in previous versions of the framework, a self-evaluation, a site-visit of the audit panel and an assessment report are part of the process of external quality assurance. These aspects are solidly translated into NQA's Guidebook Audit visits in Higher Education. The degree programme/the institution sends the assessment report to the NVAO, which takes the decision regarding the (re)accreditation of the programme, based on the conclusions of the audit panel.

#### Self-assessment

Based on the NVAO's assessment framework and NQA's Guidebook, the institution/programme draws up a self-evaluation report describing the programme's strengths and weaknesses. The report should be a self-contained document (free format) addressing the standards of the prevailing framework. The programme appends a limited number of appendices to its self-evaluation. These appendices provide insight into the set-up and content of the curriculum, the composition of the staff

team, and the teaching and examination regulations. In addition, the panel selects at random fifteen graduates as described in the *Assessment Framework for the Higher Education Accreditation System of the Netherlands*.

The products of these graduates, that in the vision of the programme showcases the realisation of the intended learning outcomes, are also part of the information provided to the panel. The panel studies these products and assesses them with respect to the intended learning outcomes and if they meet the standards of Associate Degree, Bachelor or Master. Directly after the information is available (six weeks before site visit), NQA checks the content, before sending the information file to the members of the panel for their preparation. A preliminary meeting with the panel members is held two to three weeks before the site-visit. Next to instructing/training the panel members for their task, this meeting is meant for a (first) exchange of impressions of the degree programme between the panel members, based on the self-evaluation report and the appendices.

### Site visit

A site visit is always part of the assessment process. The duration of the site visit is usually one day, unless the amount of degree programmes within an assessment requires more time. NQA chooses to include all members of the panel in the visit of the degree programme. The institution is in charge of developing a suitable schedule for the site visit (checked by NQA), which includes discussions with at least students, alumni, teachers/assessors, the examination committee and the management of the programme. NQA offers several options for the schedule of the site visit, which in practice are used/adopted by the degree programmes to determine a suitable layout. A specific feature of the NQA schedules is to start the site visit with a presentation by the degree programme. In this presentation highlights of the programme as well as strengths and weaknesses can be explained and put into context. With the implementation of the 2016 Assessment Framework, a new item in the site visits is the *development dialogue*, which NQA of course also implemented in its method of working.

### Report

The findings, considerations and conclusions of the panel are laid down in a report (section 6.6).

### Follow-up

The final report (section 6.6) of the assessment is submitted to NVAO that decides whether to accredit a degree programme based on the conclusion as laid down in the peer-review report. If a panel assesses a degree program as 'conditionally positive' - and if NVAO subsequently decides so - the institution in general applies for an improvement period of maximally two years. Based on an improvement plan, NVAO can decide to award a conditional accreditation. Within this period the degree programme must have a second assessment executed by the original panel in order to ensure whether it has been able to realize the needed improvement(s).

## NQA's assessment process schedule

The general outline of the process of degree programme assessments starting with the first step 'Acquisition' is as follows:

The general outline of the process of degree programme assessments is as follows:

Phase	(NQA staff) members involved	Description
<b>Acquisition</b>	NQA account manager	The planning for the assessments of degree programmes is prescribed by the NVAO visitation schedule. The NQA account manager contacts the institutions/degree programmes to see if degree programmes want to work with NQA as an assessment agency. The degree programmes that want this sign a contract. Part of the contract is the ' <i>NQA Guidebook for audit visits in higher education</i> ', which gives an overview of the assessment process and the underlying steps are described in more detail. Furthermore, it provides guidelines for the composition of the self-evaluation report and examples of site-visit schedules.
<b>Composition of the panel</b>	NQA secretariat, assisted by an NQA auditor	The assessment process starts with the panel composition, based on the criteria set by NVAO ( <a href="#">NVAO Panels</a> ). NQA audit panels always consist of three domain experts and a student member. The panels are composed by the degree programmes (the institutions are formally responsible for the composition) in consultation with NQA. NQA submits the panel proposal to the NVAO for approval. After the composition has been approved, the panel will be formally installed and contracted. All panel members receive a ' <i>Manual for panel members</i> ' <sup>11</sup> that describes the assessment procedure in detail and the tasks and obligations of the panel members. This manual also provides the panel members with instructions (training).
<b>Coordination of the project manager with the degree programme</b>	NQA auditor & institutions/ degree programmes	The NQA account manager hands over the assessment project to an auditor, certified by NVAO. This auditor is now the leading contact person of NQA. A meeting of the auditor with representatives of the degree programme is held to ensure the procedures (for example regarding the self-evaluation) are clear. In this meeting a few topics are always addressed: the progress regarding the panel composition, the schedule for the site-visit, required documentation, the development dialogue and the timeline.
<b>Self-evaluation report</b>	Institutions/ degree programmes	The institution/degree programme draws up a self-evaluation report in which it reflects on their achievements regarding the applicable assessment framework of the NVAO (limited / extensive). The <i>NQA Guidebook</i> includes suggestions for the composition of the self-evaluation report. At least six weeks before the site-visit the degree programme forwards the self-evaluation (including the appendices) to NQA.

<sup>11</sup> NQA, (2022), *Manual audit panel for Audit Visits in Higher Education*

<b>Validation</b>	NQA auditor	The NQA auditor screens within two weeks after receipt of the self-evaluation and appends the content of these documents and determines if they contain the required information. In a validation letter the auditor approves the submitted documents or if necessary, requests extra information. The NQA auditor forwards the self-evaluation report and the appends to the panel members.
<b>Preliminary meeting of the panel</b>	NQA auditor & panel members	About two weeks before the site-visit a preliminary panel meeting is held for a (first) exchange of impressions of the degree programme between the panel members, based on the studied documentation (self-evaluation and appends). In addition, the panel members are instructed for their tasks. The panel chair is specifically instructed in giving feedback at the end of the site visit <sup>12</sup> . A degree programme can opt for an agenda-setting preliminary meeting instead of a preliminary meeting. In that case the preliminary meeting takes place at the degree programme's location. The agenda-setting preliminary meeting starts with a short presentation of the degree programme and the panel can study relevant documentation that is provided on site by the degree programme. At the end of the meeting the panel reports to the programme the progress made in the preparation for the site-visit and the topics for discussion for the site-visit can be further established. If needed, the site-visit programme will be adapted.
<b>Site-visit</b>	NQA auditor, panel members & degree programme	A site-visit is always part of the assessment process. The schedule of the site-visit includes discussions with at least: students, alumni, teachers/assessors, the Examination Committee and the management of the programme. In addition, the panel also studies relevant documentation, for instance learning materials, examples of exams and assessments and the Examination Committee's annual report. NQA offers several options for the schedule for the site-visit, but the institution is in charge of developing a suitable schedule (checked by NQA). A specific NQA feature is the option of an agenda-setting preliminary meeting (in Dutch: 'agenderende audit') NQA offers this option to strengthen the development orientation of the interviews and the assessment. The interviews with the above-mentioned stakeholders are to verify the information provided in the self-evaluation and gather additional information. The site-visit always concludes with a notification of the provisional results of the assessment by the chair of the panel. Subsequently, a development dialogue takes place between degree programme and the panel. this dialogue can take place at the end of the day or on a separate moment.

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<sup>12</sup> *Richtlijnen terugkoppeling (see portal 'documenten')*

<b>Report</b>	NQA auditor & panel members	<p>The auditor writes a draft report based on the submitted documents, the outcome of the preliminary meeting and the results of the site-visit. The findings, considerations and conclusions of the panel regarding each standard of the prevailing assessment framework are laid down in the report. The full panel is asked to give feedback on the report in writing on all standards. The final draft version of a report is also co-read by an NQA-colleague, and if found necessary, by a third reader (in general by the NQA director).</p> <p>Based on this feedback, the auditor finalizes the draft version, and this will be passed on to the degree programme, which is given the opportunity to correct factual inaccuracies. The degree programme's reaction is presented to the complete panel after which the final report will be established.</p>
<b>Follow-up</b>	Degree programme/ Institution/ NVAO/NQA	<p>The degree programme/institution submit a request for accreditation to NVAO, based on the final assessment report. If a panel assesses a degree programme as 'conditionally positive' the institution can apply for an improvement period. Based on an improvement plan, NVAO can decide to extend the period of accreditation with two years. Within this period the degree programme has to undergo a second assessment in order to ensure whether it has been able to realize the needed improvement(s). The follow-up phase also includes the appeal procedure of NQA (see chapter 8.3.5).</p>

### Evaluation

The external quality assurance processes include a self-assessment, a site-visit, a peer-review report and a consistent follow-up. NQA consistently adopts the NVAO assessment framework(s). NQA translates this to internal (working) processes that contribute to a reliable and useful execution. By standardizing our internal work processes, including checks and balances, instructions for the degree programmes (guidebooks, protocols), selection and training of the panel members for assessments of degree programmes (manual for panel members) and the training of our auditors, NQA feels confident its assessments of degree programmes are carried out professionally, consistently and transparently.

In general, but specifically regarding the assessments of degree programmes, NQA wants to focus on the content of the degree programmes. The NQA approach is based on trust and confidence. The aim is to approach the assessment in an appreciative manner and to report in a development-oriented way. Based on the feedback collected from assessed degree programmes, the feedback in account-evaluations and the feedback of NVAO, NQA feels it succeeds in this ambition.

#### 6.4. ESG Standard 2.4 Peer-review experts

*External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s).*

The NQA audit panels always consist of three domain experts and a student member. For the composition of the audit panels, NQA designed a work process that follows the regulations set by the NVAO (see: Guidebook for assessments in higher education, section 2). The members of the panels are independent and experts in the discipline concerned, in education, the professional field, assessment aspects, and in student issues. In addition, the panel commands international expertise and experience. Every panel member has to sign of a declaration of independence (see chapter 5.3), The requirements (see Guidebook for assessments in higher education, appendix 3: Expertise of panel members) ensue, as NVAO states, from the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance* in the European Higher Education Area (*European Standards and Guidelines, ESG*) and are formulated in the spirit of the requirements set at the European level for such panels in higher education. NQA adopted these requirements in its process to compose the panels. NQA submits the panel proposal for approval to NVAO commissioned by the institution. When the composition is approved, the panel will be formally installed and contracted. NQA supports the programme and institution in their process of composing their audit panels to meet the NVAO-requirements. The programme and formally the institution is responsible for the composition of their audit panel. They have the competence to propose to the NVAO an audit panel against the advice of NQA.

All panel members receive a 'Manual for panel members' that in detail describes the assessment procedure, their tasks and obligations. This manual also provides the panel members with instructions (training) to support a valuable assessment procedure. For example, these instructions include information on the standards (of the NVAO Assessment Framework) that are leading in the assessment, the definitions of judgement (assessment criteria), but also address the desired attitude for the interviews during the site-visit and provide specific instructions for the chairman. During the preliminary discussion (one/two weeks before the site-visit) this training concludes with the instructions of the involved NQA auditor. Less experienced chairs and in some cases panel members are separately instructed before the preliminary discussion. Chairs of the panels sign a document stating they are instructed and trained for their specific task.

##### Evaluation

NQA believes its practice is compliant with ESG 2.4. The quality of audit panels is our calling card for the institutions/degree programmes NQA assesses. NQA takes on a highly valued supportive role in the process of the panel composition, but within the assessments of (degree) programmes it is the institutions responsibility. Mostly programmes follow our advice and support in ensuring that the composition of their audit panel meets the requirements. However,

the programmes/institutions select the experts and present them for approval to NVAO. NQA gives advice to the programme on the quality of each panel member and the audit panel as a whole, but it is only an advice. Furthermore, NQA handles the administrative process to obtain the approval of the NVAO. In general, the institutions are satisfied with the quality of the panels and the way they perform. Their involvement in the composition process is appreciated and strengthens their commitment to the outcomes. Furthermore, our project evaluations show that institutes value the expertise and professionalism of our panels. Institutes experience a positive constructive approach that leads to a development-oriented assessment of their degree programmes. On the other hand, the evaluations show us that the input of the student member of the panel could be enriched. NQA therefore, has held two conferences with student unions and recently published a separate student instruction<sup>13</sup>.

As a result of stricter requirements by NVAO for the expertise in the audit panels for degree programmes, as well as the growing complexity of composing the panels due to the desired participation of at least one panel member in different panels of the cluster group, NQA pays a lot of attention to this aspect of the assessment process. It has become a bigger challenge to meet the requirements for the audit panels and guarantee the overlap between the audit panels of degree programmes within their cluster. By intensifying the deliberation with our colleague assessment agencies and the extension of the timeline for the composition, NQA manages to install panels that meet all requirements.

Furthermore, more attention should be paid to the support of the programme management. We see that educational institutions tend to delegate the organisation of panel composition from central, executive departments to the management of the programme. At programme level the expertise in panel composition is often less available, leading to more questions and requests that need be dealt with by NQA.

## 6.5. ESG Standard 2.5 Criteria for outcomes

*Any outcomes or judgements made as a result of external quality assurance should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision.*

The criteria set by NVAO in its Assessment Framework are leading in the judgements of our audit panels on the quality of the degree programmes. The criteria are published on the NVAO website and are adopted in the 'NQA Guidelines for audit visits of degree programmes' and in the Manual for panel members.

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<sup>13</sup> NQA, (2022), *Handleiding Studentpanellid*

The following assessment rules apply:

<b>Judgement per standard:</b>	<b>Assessment rules for overall judgement on the degree programme (limited):</b>	<b>Assessment rules for overall judgement on the degree programme (extensive):</b>
<p>The panel scores each standard according to the following scale:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Meets the standard</li> <li>- Partially meets the standard</li> <li>- Does not meet the standard.</li> </ul>	<p>The panel recommends a</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Positive</li> <li>- Conditionally positive</li> <li>- Negative</li> </ul> <p>conclusion regarding the programme on the categories</p>	<p>The panel recommends a</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Positive</li> <li>- Conditionally positive</li> <li>- Negative</li> </ul> <p>conclusion regarding the programme on the categories.</p>
<p>Definition scores for judgement on standards:</p> <p><b>Meets the standard:</b> The programme meets the generic quality standard.</p> <p><b>Partially meets the standard:</b> The programme meets the generic quality standard to a significant extent, but improvements are required in order to fully meet the standard.</p> <p><b>Does not meet the standard:</b> The programme does not meet the generic quality standard.</p> <p>Definition generic quality: the quality that, from an international perspective, may reasonably be expected from a higher education Associate Degree, Bachelor's or Master's programme.</p>	<p>Rules for overall judgement</p> <p><b>Positive:</b> The programme meets all the standards;</p> <p><b>Conditionally positive:</b> The programme meets standard 1 and partially meets a maximum of two standards, with the imposition of conditions being recommended by the panel;</p> <p><b>Negative:</b> In the following situations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The programme fails to meet one or more standards;</li> <li>- The programme partially meets standard 1;</li> <li>- The programme partially meets one or two standards, without the imposition of conditions being recommended by the panel;</li> <li>- The programme partially meets three or more standards.</li> </ul>	<p>Rules for overall judgement:</p> <p><b>Positive:</b> The programme meets all the standards;</p> <p><b>Conditionally positive:</b> The programme meets standard 1 and partially meets a maximum of five standards, with the imposition of conditions being recommended by the panel;</p> <p><b>Negative:</b> In the following situations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The programme fails to meet one or more standards;</li> <li>- The programme partially meets standard 1;</li> <li>- The programme partially meets one to five standards, without the imposition of conditions being recommended by the panel;</li> <li>- The programme partially meets six or more standards.</li> </ul>

Source: *Assessment Framework, NVAO (2018)*

To assure a consistent interpretation and application of the criteria, NQA discusses them regularly with its auditors, with panel members and with colleague assessment agencies. NQA cooperates with other assessment agencies (in the cluster groups) and panel members participate in the different panels of a cluster group. This leads to discussions and a more in depth understanding of the generic quality per standard. As part of our internal quality assurance, every draft version of a report is co-read by a colleague (four-eyes principle). The interpretation and application of the criteria is part of this internal check system.

In the past five years, NVAO has adopted all the judgements given by NQA audit panels. As mentioned before, NQA is not the body that decides on (re)accreditation of degree programmes. NVAO takes the audit panel report (which includes the panel's considerations, judgements and recommendations) as a starting point for its own assessment. NVAO verifies whether a panel has convincingly supports its judgements and whether it has carried out the assessment in accordance with the NVAO's guidelines. Only in a few cases, NVAO has asked an audit panel for additional information on the judgements made in their peer-review report.

### Evaluation

The judgements of the NQA audit panels are clearly based on explicit and published criteria. The prevailing NVAO framework that forms the solid starting point of the assessment is part of the contract that an institution/degree programme signs with NQA. Furthermore, the NVAO criteria are adopted in the 'NQA Guidelines for audit visits of degree programmes' and in the 'Manual for panel members'. This includes a further elaboration of the NVAO criteria to assure a consistent interpretation.

In the assessment procedure of NQA, institutions(degree) programmes are enabled to point out factual inaccuracies in a draft version of the peer-review report. Evaluations indicate that institutions/degree programmes appreciate this opportunity to point out factual inaccuracies. They experience the assessment by the NQA panel to be carried out correctly and carefully.

## **6.6. ESG Standard 2.6 Reporting**

*Full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals. If the agency takes any formal decision based on the reports, the decision should be published together with the report.*

### Assessment of degree programmes

Taking into consideration that NVAO is the formal decision-taking body within the Dutch system of external quality assurance, it is their obligation to publish the peer-review reports as well as their formal decision based on that (advisory) report. As stated before, these peer-review reports are produced mainly by assessment agencies, such as NQA, and serve as the basis for the NVAO decisions on (re)accreditation. The NVAO website provides a publicly available and searchable database that contains links to the decisions and the underlying peer-review reports. NQA itself does not publish reports on degree programmes, because of confidentiality and the fact that formally the institution/degree programme is the owner of the report.

The NQA peer-review reports include:

- a context description of the institution/degree programme, including, for example, orientation and level of the programme;
- a description of the individual procedure, including the experts involved: for example: applicable NVAO framework and the names and roles of the panel members;
- evidence, analysis and findings: based on the applicable NVAO framework, the findings, considerations and judgements of the audit panel form the main component of our peer-review reports;
- conclusions; in a separate chapter the audit panel weighs its judgements on the standards of the applicable framework to conclude on the overall judgement of the degree programme (based on the assessment rules for overall judgement on the programme set in the NVAO framework);
- recommendations for follow-up action: in a separate chapter the audit panel presents its recommendations logically derived from their findings on their judgements on the standards.

The NQA peer-review reports, furthermore, contain a summary and before finalizing the peer-review report, the degree programme has the opportunity to point out factual inaccuracies in the draft version of the report.

### Evaluation

As a result of the arrangement of the Dutch system of external quality assurance, NQA does not publish the reports of their assessments of degree programmes. NVAO is the formal decision-taking organisation within this system and so the designated body to publish the decision on (re)accreditation and the underlying peer-review reports. The decisions and reports are publicly available on the website of the NVAO ([www.nvaio.net](http://www.nvaio.net)). NQA has included this link to the NVAO database on its own website

<https://www.nqa.nl/nl/beoordeling/opleidingsvisitatie>. In self-reflective perspective, NQA feels that from its position within the quality assurance framework it has little options to publish more than what is published by NVAO.

## **6.7. ESG Standard 2.7 Complaints and appeals**

*Complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to the institutions.*

### Assessment of degree programmes

NQA has first of all a two-step formal procedure in place for complaints and appeals by institutions/degree programmes regarding the assessment of the degree programmes<sup>14</sup>. The first step in the appeal procedure has the form of 'hear both sides' consultation and aims at reaching consensus on the facts and mutual understanding about the assessment if the

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<sup>14</sup> NQA, (2022), *Klachten- en bezwaarprocedure*

outcome of the assessment is negative. This meeting can lead to the following outcomes, described in the 'NQA Guidelines for audit visits in higher education':

- the degree programme accepts NQA-panel's judgement;
- the NQA-panel has overlooked or misinterpreted documents received prior to the site-visit or those presented for inspection. The panel re-appraises specifically those standards that have been negatively assessed. The panel and the programme make a record of what is to be re-appraised, how it will be implemented and according to which time schedule;
- The NQA-panel will postpone the final verdict to allow the programme to make corrections; The NQA-panel and the programme set down in writing how this will happen and according to which time schedule;
- The NQA-panel amends the assessment;
- The NQA-panel abides by its verdict, although this is unacceptable to the programme. The programme is then free to request a second opinion.

If the institution/degree programme is still unsatisfied after completing the first step, an [independent external complaint and appeals procedure](#) is in place. This procedure is also available in the case that NQA, in the opinion of the institution/programme, made procedural errors that affect the outcome of the assessment.

Furthermore, NQA's Quality Management document provides the handling of complaints. It differentiates internal complaints of staff members and external complaints. The procedure for internal complaints is elaborated in NQA's Personnel Manual. External complaints are appointed to the NQA account manager of the institution or the director of NQA. An inventory consultation is set up followed by possible follow-up arrangements. If the complaint issues the assessment procedure, the [above-mentioned appeal procedure](#) comes into force.

The use of the appeal procedure and the procedure for complaints is a rarity. The introduction of the scale of judgement 'good' and 'excellent' (in addition to 'sufficient') made institutions/degree programmes less hesitant to seek procedures like these to influence the outcome of the assessment. This is one of the reasons why in 2018 the scale of judgment was limited to 'negative', 'conditionally positive' or 'positive'. Since then, NQA didn't receive a complaint anymore. The recommendation on ESG 2.7 is subscribed by NQA. Due to other priorities to handle workload, staff members that left, the introduction of new staff members, Covid-19 and the lack of complaints made that the introduction of this procedure published on our website (in fact the second step) has been delayed to 2022, and in fact the last quarter of 2022. See also 8.3.5.

### Evaluation

NQA has procedures in place for processing appeals and complaints (see also 8.3.5). The procedures are checked within NQA's ISO 9001:2015 certification and are found to comply with its requirements. Since 2018 no complaints have been made, neither from our clients nor from other stakeholders.

## 7. Opinion of stakeholders

### 7.1. Evaluation of degree programme assessments

As described in chapter 5.6, NQA organises several evaluative activities that provide us with information and the opinion of our main stakeholders. In this chapter you will find a summarized overview of the results of our (main) evaluations. The chapter addresses the outcomes of the evaluations held among assessed degree programmes, our account evaluations, our consultations with NVAO and the annual ISO (9001) audit.

The annual reports of the evaluations held under assessed degree programmes are presented and discussed by the staff of NQA. These evaluations indicate a high satisfaction for the assessments conducted by NQA. This is clearly expressed in the average score of 8.0, in the past five years, on a scale of one to ten. The comments show that the cooperation with the NQA auditor is highly appreciated. The communication is clear and open. The cooperation is pleasant, and programmes appreciate the expertise and experience of the auditors. They are considered to be flexible and responding quickly. Similar positive feedback is given for the panel members. They are appreciated for their experience and constructive approach. They are well prepared, and the development/ appreciative approach is appreciated by the degree programmes. The site visits are well executed as agreed. Also, the visits during the periods of Covid restrictions were well organised. As to the reports, the findings are also positive; the programmes find the reports to be clear and well written. Some indicate that the reporting took more time than planned. NQA expects that this will improve because of the new NVAO visitation schedule, in which the degree assessments are more evenly distributed over the years from 2023 onwards.

The return rate of the evaluation forms increased in the past three years from 60% in 2019 to 80% in 2021. The satisfaction, expressed on a 1-10 scale, climbed from 7.6 in 2019 to 8.4 in 2021. NQA is very pleased with this result; it shows NQA manages to carry out valuable assessments, even in times of Covid measures. When programmes show constructive criticism on (aspects of) the assessments, they also make clear that this is sometimes beyond our span of control, for example, when an auditor or a panel member gets sick and must be replaced. More valuable to us is the feedback that we can be more precise in preventing typing errors and/or grammatical errors. This led to the procedure that since 2020 reports have been checked on typing and/or grammatical errors. This effort resulted in no remarks on this matter in 2021. Another remark concerned the quality of the feedback given at the end of the site visit by the chair of the panel. NQA paid special attention to this feedback to improve the quality and the alignment with the findings of the assessment and the general feeling during the site visit. This effort also resulted to no remarks in this respect in 2021.

## 7.2. Account evaluations

The evaluations by the account managers show that the institutions are very satisfied with the assignments conducted by NQA (assessments of degree programmes). In the consultations, institutions let us know that they are pleased with our procedures, methodologies as well as with the execution and the evaluation of the projects. As the evaluations by the account managers are on a more strategic level, this is also a platform to discuss the system of accreditation in a broader sense. As mentioned in chapter 5.6, the account evaluations have become less formal and more interactive in day-to-day contacts. NQA regrets this, but it has no effect on the conclusions NQA is presenting in 7.3. This still shows us that our position is valued and that it is appreciated that NQA is a constructive critical partner in the accreditation system. Our continuous pleas for the independence of peer panels and for ensuring valid assessments, is appreciated. The account evaluations (formal and informal) also address the assessments/evaluations of degree programmes that were less pleased with the outcomes. But the consultations on the level of the institutions (accounts) show that we manage to overcome these issues with respect to the independence of a particular expert panel and/or its judgement. After some time almost every less positive judgement is considered to be just and fair. Degree programmes almost every time comment that the panel has identified and seen the shortcomings of the programme very well.

## 7.3. Consultations with NVAO

The consultations with NVAO show their appreciation for our work as an assessment agency. In general, NVAO is pleased with our contribution to the system of external quality assurance and highly appreciates the quality of our assessments and reports. In this respect, NQA addressed two complaints to NVAO concerning 'AVG' (General Data Protection Regulation)<sup>15</sup> and the independence of panel members<sup>16</sup>. In our opinion these complaints were not handled in a satisfactory way. Furthermore, the relation with NVAO has become even more distant as a result of the NVAO policies in this respect,. NQA finds this very remarkable because the agencies deliver 95% of the reports of existing programmes (see 8.2.6). Regarding our working methods, our performances on panel composition are considered a strong point. This concerns specifically our focus on expertise, independence and our time management within the assessment processes. NVAO is also satisfied with our reports, which in almost all cases are accepted without any further questions.

## 7.4. ISO audit (9001:2015)

NQA applies the requirements of the quality management system ISO 9001:2015. Every year the compliance with this ISO-standard is audited and demonstrated. The outcomes of these annual audits are always positive. In February 2022 the external agency DNV extended the

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<sup>15</sup> NQA, (2019), *Reactie op NVAO brief AVG*

<sup>16</sup> NQA, (2019), *Onafhankelijkheid voorzitters panel*

certificate until June 2025 stating that NQA complies with the ISO 9001:2015 standard. The certificate refers to the scope: assessing and advising on the quality of education.

The following aspects have been pointed out in the ISO- reports as our strong points:

- Positive financial results, despite the leaving of two auditors.
- NQA has been able to quickly attract three new auditors who have been trained adequately in a short time.
- New auditors indicate that the induction process was well executed.
- The increased and high satisfaction of stakeholders.
- The attention given to preventing typing and grammatical errors.
- The effective communication with degree programmes and panels about the Covid measures in 2020 and 2021.

In addition to these positive remarks, the ISO audits led to a limited number of observations, but no non-conformities. NQA has taken the observations into consideration. They have led to improvements, such as the improved referencing in the quality management system to standard documentation used.

## 8. Recommendations and main findings from the previous review and follow-up

### 8.1. Introduction

NQA has been continuously successful since the previous ENQA review, not only because of the high standard of quality it has achieved but also commercially and financially. NQA has been successful in winning most of the tenders. The number of research evaluations has increased and NQA was able to obtain 60% of all midterm reviews of the 'Experiment learning outcomes'. In addition, the client appreciation has increased from 7.6 in 2018 to 8.4 in 2021.

This success, however, also leads to a high work pressure. Degree programmes are assessed according to the NVAO visitation schedule. Regrettably the audit visits were not evenly divided over the course of the past six years. The busiest years were from 2017 to 2019. During this time NQA devoted all its attention to the primary process of assessments. The large number of scheduled audit visits coincided with the evaluation of the study programmes participating in the 'Experiment learning outcomes'. Moreover, NQA succeeded in attracting more clients who asked to conduct research evaluations at Universities of Applied Sciences. It was a challenge for NQA to remain financially fit during the period of unbalanced workload in the last 6 years. At the same time, it is also a challenge to retain expertise and direct staff effectively to ensure carrying out competent assessments of degree programmes. NQA is, therefore, very pleased that from 2023 onwards the workload will be more balanced because of the new NVAO visitation schedule (see 8.2.1 and 8.2.5). Considering the many complicating factors, maintaining such a high standard of quality over the past 6 years exceeds expectations.

Normally the work pressure would have decreased by mid-2020, but it continued due to the Covid measures. NQA had to pay additional attention to make online audit visits possible. In close consultation with stakeholders and clients NQA managed to retain the requested quality of their assessments. Furthermore, two new staff members left NQA within 1.5 year at the end of 2020. As a result, NQA had to spend time on recruiting and training new staff. This staff turnover also caused the transfer of assessment projects from old to new auditors, resulting in more time spent on the coordination with clients, delays and pressure on existing staff. There was a concern that this would affect the average client appreciation score but, as mentioned before, the client appreciation even improved. These unforeseen developments have had a considerable impact on planning and implementing the improvements regarding the ENQA suggestions and recommendations as specified in the letter in which the ENQA Board confirmed NQA's membership. The important improvements were planned for the first half of 2020 but several of these have been postponed until even 2022.

In the following paragraphs NQA indicates per recommendation what action it has taken or still plans to take. If NQA sees no opportunity to act within the possibilities offered by the Dutch accreditation system or does not endorse the added value of a recommendation, it will give further clarification.

## 8.2. Follow-up recommendations ESG 3

### 8.2.1. ESG 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance

*NQA is recommended to set up an advisory committee with representatives of different relevant stakeholders.*

*NQA is recommended to formalise its strategic plan to reflect on its objectives*

Follow-up NQA:

- As indicated during the previous site visit, NQA sees insufficient added value in an advisory committee. When NQA was founded in 2003 (see 4.1) and advisory committee was appointed. At that time the committee played an important role in overseeing the transition to a private, independent organization. Within a few years after the foundation the advisory committee found that the stakeholder contacts were so frequent, diverse and inherent to the primary processes, that their additional contribution the NQA was of little value. The NQA account managers and auditors are in close contact with their stakeholders. They value the importance of feedback given and are willing to act adequately on suggestions.
- In 2019 and 2020, NQA consulted intensively with student unions in the Netherlands (see section 8.2.4 for more clarity) to boost student involvement. The results were subsequently discussed with a large delegation of committed quality assurance staff members from education institutes.
- In 2019 and 2020, NQA also had in-depth discussions with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences about the further development of the Dutch accreditation system. Moreover, in 2019, all NQA auditors spent a whole day visiting two major education institutes to learn from their experiences and exchange know-how. All these activities were discussed during team meetings and insofar they were applicable, have had an impact on policy and/or procedures. This more thematic interaction with stakeholders is pursued in addition to regular intensive contacts with stakeholders of which a description is included in the Quality Management Document (see section 5.6).
- In the Covid-period 2020-2022 NQA had an intensive dialogue with institutions and programme management how to organize the online-assessments. As a result of that adequate and quick response to the new circumstances, NQA introduced as the first agency the hybrid-assessment. Besides that, we quickly introduced instructions<sup>17</sup> for programme managements, experts and auditors how to organize and conduct an online-assessment. This effort contributed also to the customer satisfaction growing from 7.6 to 8.4 in this period.
- In September 2022 we organized, having learned from online-assessments, two online consultations with our panel-members. The main results were that panel members are highly satisfied with the received NQA support, which is conceived as professional and covering all aspects of their tasks. The way NQA staff interacts with panel members gives them a feeling of respect and doing the job together. They are impressed in the way the auditors support the panel as sparring partners. NQA auditors are easily accessible and the quality of the reports, according to panel members, is impressive. They feel that the NQA auditors are really of senior level<sup>6</sup>.
- NQA has a different way of strategic planning and works towards goals and objectives in a less institutionalized/traditional way, so adaptation can be quickly realized if necessary and time is saved by avoiding highly bureaucratic procedures. The annual management review is a formal,

<sup>17</sup> NQA, (2020), *Visitaties tijdens Covid maatregelen (see portal 'documenten')*

substantiated document. NQA annually outlines its goals/objectives in a formal director's assessment, in keeping in line with its mission and vision specified in the Quality Management Document, which also incorporates its long-term objectives. Every year this director's assessment looks back and forward incorporating the major developments. This way of working makes NQA highly flexible. The discussion about the introduction of a new institutional accreditation system, for example, is monitored closely in the director's assessment, nearly on a monthly basis. The result of this close monitoring is the newly formulated plan 'Ambitions 2023-2028'<sup>18</sup> in October 2022, within two weeks after our government had decided to introduce the new system. The operationalization of 'Ambitions 2023-2028' will be reviewed in our annual management review and goals will be adapted if necessary. Another example is the new NVAO-schedule. NQA analysed this immediately in the summer of 2022 resulting in a three-years prognosis and policy on workload, financial and staff consequences. In NQA's opinion, a formalised strategic plan is a long-term document that does not suit the dynamics and developments of the environment in which NQA operates. Over the years, the organisation's flexibility has resulted in several experiments which gave NQA a better position compared to its competitors. Experiments with cluster visitations in the period 2012-2015, including thematic analyses, are proven examples of the advantage of flexibility. More recently, in 2019, the 'agenda-setting preliminary meeting' was introduced which caters to clients who want a better regulation of the accreditation process and a stronger focus on development rather than assessment during the site visit. Because of the success of this 'agenda-setting audit' we present this way of preparing and conducting the site visit as our default option.

### 8.2.2. ESG 3.3. Independence

*NQA is recommended to establish stricter internal procedures in order to better organise consulting and assessment.*

*It is recommended that NQA stresses the importance of including a number of international experts in audit panels assigned to review institutions.*

Follow-up NQA:

- The internal procedures NQA employs to separate evaluating and advisory activities have been described as adequate in the 'ENQA Agency Review Netherlands Quality Agency (ENQA 2018)'. In 2018 no deficiencies were identified regarding this aspect. The recommendation for stricter procedures does not mean the implementation of stricter procedures but recommends a consistent monitoring of existing procedures. Therefore, this recommendation urged NQA to stay alert on an independent position. A typical example for this alertness is the consultation of NVAO if a certain advice request would compromise NQA's independent position. NVAO responded that it would not be the case (see also ESG 3.3 and NVAO opinion<sup>19</sup>).
- In the Netherlands, the degree programme determines the composition of the audit panel. The NVAO must approve the proposed panel composition before the panel can start the assessment. Degree programmes are not required to appoint an international expert. Sometimes, considering the specific situation of the study programme, an international expert is requested, but most of the times it is not necessary. NQA's position is to advise degree programmes to compose a competent panel. If it is desirable to include an international panel member, given the profile of the degree

<sup>18</sup> NQA, (2022), *Ambitions 2023-2028*

<sup>19</sup> *Reactie NVAO op onafhankelijkheid secretarissen (see portal 'documenten')*

programme, the international ambitions or features, NQA will advise to do so. Since the Covid-19 pandemic measures, NQA sees more possibilities to facilitate the participation of international panel members. Degree programmes are more used to online meetings, so international panel members participating in online assessments without traveling and costs could become more common practice. However, at the moment NQA experiences that clients are not using the possibilities to increase the participation of international panel members.

### 8.2.3. ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis

*NQA is recommended to include thematic analysis in its planning as a regular activity. NQA is recommended to use a part of the budget and the experience and knowledge of internal and external auditors gained from various assessment procedures in order to conduct those thematic analyses.*

Follow-up NQA:

- NQA organized workshops in 2019 and 2020 with student unions in the Netherlands together with QANU. The results of these workshops were published in the 'HO magazine' (magazine for management in higher education (see portal 'documenten') in 2019 and 2020 and on the websites of NQA and the student unions. To prepare for the workshops, NQA auditors teamed up with external auditors to share and communicate their findings in student involvement. In addition to the published results, a list of 'do's and don'ts' was composed for student panel members and students interviewed by the audit panel during a site-visit. NQA published [the do's and don'ts](#) on its website in September 2020. The results will also be included in the 2022 panel guide book for students.
- One of the auditors made an inventory of provisions regarding the legal retention period for documents in response to the many questions posed by clients. Auditors can help clients when ambiguities arise concerning this topic. The document of this inventory is on the NQA website (<https://www.nqa.nl/nl/beoordeling/bewaartermijnen-toetsen>).
- Together with other agencies, NQA has drawn up a memorandum for the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science about the quality of the accreditation system and its continued development. NQA initiated the first draft of this writing<sup>20</sup>.
- NQA has made available to NVAO, two legally substantiated memorandums<sup>21</sup> partly based on ESG directives. The first concerns measures implemented by NVAO regarding 'privacy laws' and the impact on transparency of the assessment process. The second focuses on the stricter requirements for impartiality of panel members and whether NVAO provides sufficient safeguards to ensure this. Although both documents are internal reports exchanged by NQA and NVAO, they nonetheless show NQA's intensive commitment to the quality assurance of the accreditation system.
- NQA has formulated the goal of holding a thematic analysis once every two years and furnishing the necessary means to make this possible. Because of Covid this has not been realized until September 2022. NQA assessed 196 programmes taken part of the 'Experiment Learning Outcomes' and published on her website an analysis on this experiment.
- In addition to the more thematic analysis Mrs. Y Leegstra, NQA-auditor, is participating in a national committee concerning the quality assurance of programmatic testing.

<sup>20</sup> NQA, (2020) *Ruimte binnen de bestaande kaders, discussie notitie instellingsaccreditatie gezamenlijke evaluatiebureaus t.b.v. OCW* (see portal 'documenten')

<sup>21</sup> NQA, (2019), *Onafhankelijkheid voorzitters panel* (see portal 'documenten')

- Mr Paul Thijssen is participating in a review committee as part of an PhD trajectory on the quality of judgments by panels.

#### 8.2.4. ESG 3.5 Resource

*NQA is recommended to look at measures to keep valuable staff members engaged in the organisation during the periods of low workload.*

*The panel recommends that NQA increases the interaction between internal and external secretaries.*

Follow-up NQA:

- NQA recruited new staff in 2018 and 2019. This was done partly to replace staff members who the directorate knew were leaving after a prolonged tenure to pursue new challenges elsewhere. It was also done to expand existing staff to cope with the increasing number of assignments. Recruitment of new employees was based on a broader profile, so that staff can be deployed in a wider capacity in 'periods of low workload'. The two new staff members did not find their challenge within NQA and left regrettably already at the end of 2020. In the beginning of 2021 three new staff members joined NQA. Because of these changes in staff and recruiting and settling in of the new staff members, because of the large amount of mid-term assessments 'Experiment Learning Outcomes' and all the rescheduling caused by Covid-19, there has not been a period of low workload. Finally, the NVAO in corporation with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science decided to spread the assessments more equally over the 6-years schedule from 2023 on. NQA has analysed this schedule and this means that the workload in 2023-2025 is reasonably spread over these years. At the moment the schedule gives not yet enough information about the period of 2026-2028, but the rescheduling until now gives reason to be optimistic. With the new schedule the problem of an unbalanced workload over the years is not an issue anymore.
- In our document 'Addition to the follow-up report ENQA review, December 2020'<sup>22</sup> NQA presented its actions to increase the interaction between internal and external secretaries. At this moment NQA has no additions to the measures presented in 2020, nor are they necessary based on our evaluations.

#### 8.2.5. ESG 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

*NQA is recommended to reflect on ways to intensify the communication with the authorities and other relevant stakeholders in order to gather greater feedback about procedures and their effectiveness and relevance.*

Follow-up NQA:

- See ESG 8.2.1 and 8.2.4, which make clear that relations with students and education institutes have been further intensified.
- The relation with the Dutch authorities has become more remote due to a legislative amendment in 2018, especially as a result of NVAO's interpretation thereof. The legislative amendment means that the individual secretary now functions as contact person for NVAO and no longer the assessment agencies. At an operational level the relation between staff of NVAO and NQA remains good even though agencies no longer count as discussion partners on policy matters. Because of the way government wants to handle the relation with the agencies, NQA will not actively invest anymore in intensifying this relationship.

<sup>22</sup> Addition to the follow-up report ENQA review, December 2020 (see portal 'documenten')

- For the first time, a dialogue had been initiated with the Ministry of Education. regarding the further development of the accreditation system (see section 5.4 and 8.2.4). It is regrettable that our advice, while the arguments within the document were fully recognized by the Ministry was completely put aside.
- The relation with the Education Inspectorate remains good and was further strengthened in 2019 as a result of an invitation by the inspectorate to participate in its annual education congress. Agencies are not normally invited. Unfortunately, this was not possible due to Covid-19 restrictions.
- As a reaction to ‘suggestions for further improvement’, NQA has formulated the ambition to intensify its relations with panel members. This is why NQA organized two online review sessions in 2022 to be repeated once every two years (see also 8.2.1. ESG 3.1).

### 8.3. Follow-up recommendations ESG 2

#### 8.3.1. ESG 2.1 Considerations for internal quality assurance

*It is recommended that NQA could demonstrate in its procedures and guidelines more the ties between the standards of Part 1 of the ESG and the standards in the programme assessment framework, in order to strengthen the awareness of panels and institutions. NQA is recommended to evaluate in how far the ESG standard 2.1 is effectively addressed during the programme assessments and communicate its findings to the relevant stakeholders*

Follow-up NQA:

- The NVAO assesses ‘Part 1 of the ESG’ as made clear in the previous document ‘ENQA Agency Review Netherlands Quality Agency (ENQA (2018))’. Audit panels and NQA are explicitly requested to avoid an overlap of assessments between the ‘institutional audit’ carried out by the NVAO and the ‘limited programme audit’ executed by NQA. This was also emphasized in the introduction of NVAO’s new ‘assessment framework 2018’. ‘Limited programme audits’ implemented by the NQA are not expected to address ‘Part 1 of the ESG’. Due to national legislation NQA can therefore not follow through on these recommendations.
- What NQA does do in situations when shortcomings are found during a limited framework audit caused by deficiencies arising from Part 1 of the ESG, is to annotate them as points for improvement in its report. The reports in which shortcomings refer to ‘Part 1 of the ESG’, have all been included in the formal decision taken by the NVAO. At the same time, none of the reports have been revised by the NVAO to include recommendations for improvement that refer to ‘Part 1 of the ESG’.
- If panel members have questions about the limited programme audit in relation to ESG part 1, these questions are answered by the auditor individually or during the preliminary meeting of the complete panel. These questions arise rarely. If they arise the auditor explains to the panel members why it is not a criteria within the framework. Sometimes it feels frustrating not to assess certain aspects concerning ESG 2.1, but it never leads to problems in the quality of the assessments.

### 8.3.2. ESG 2.4 Peer-review experts

*NQA is recommended to strengthen the training of panel members in different ways, such as training sessions for new members and update sessions for experienced members.*

Follow-up NQA:

- The performance as well as feedback of panel members is important. That's why NQA conducted in the second half of 2018 a formal internal audit within the framework of ISO-2015.

Four results came out of this internal audit:

- o Writing a guideline for chair panel members how to give the final feedback and preliminary results at the end of the site-visit. Every chair receives this document<sup>8</sup>.
- o Work-out the instruction for new (chair)panel members. This is introduced in the annual guidebook for panel member. Besides this the 'agenda-setting preliminary meeting' further supports panel members to be better prepared in conducting the assessments (see below)
- o Explore the possibility of a buddy-system for chairs. This is not realized because of workload and lack of urgency. The panel members gave the suggestion (but not an urgent one) to think through a buddy-system for less experienced chairs. NQA will discuss this suggestions internally but the lack of urgency and the financial constraints will influence the possibilities.
- o Explore a regular meeting with panel members to learn and further improve (result: realised for student members (see section 5,4 and 8.2.4); Realized for peer panel members in 2022 because of workload and Covid, see section 8.2.1)
- Since 2018 NQA analyses all degree programme assessments yearly, resulting in the mentioned client satisfaction of 8.4 in 2022. The quality of the panel is one of the criteria. Over the years the quality of the panels is highly valued, with only exceptions that had nothing to do with the preparation of panel members.
- The preparation/training of panel members has been improved. Chairpersons and panel members who have not yet participated in an assessment will be briefed individually by the auditor. Extra time has been reserved during preparatory discussions to accommodate this.
- The audit panel guidebook incorporates since 2019 the most important changes regarding the previous 'assessment frameworks' from 2016 and 2018. It is very important that panel members are aware of this. For that reason, preparatory meetings will begin with a summing up of the most important changes by the auditor.
- The introduction of the 'agenda-setting preliminary meeting' also helps panel members to acquaint themselves with the 'assessment framework' and the related calibration. Because preparatory meetings are held on location several weeks before the site-visit along with an initial introductory talk with the management of the study programme, there is more time for panel members to adjust to the context of the study programme in the build-up to the actual site-visit. Right then there is still sufficient opportunity for additional instruction if the auditor notices that a panel member lacks insight.

### 8.3.3. ESG 2.5 Criteria for outcomes

*NQA is recommended to strengthen the training of panel members about the application of the criteria and using that expertise to build a more robust view about them and further improve consistency.*

Follow-up NQA:

- With the introduction of the 'Assessment Framework 2018', 'the grading system' of the standards was changed from a four-points scale: 'excellent-good-satisfactory-unsatisfactory' to a three-points scale: 'sufficient - partly sufficient -insufficient' (meets the standard, partly meets the

standard, does not meet the standard). Both the Agencies and NVAO are extremely pleased with this change, because it promotes consistency to a high degree and eliminates the window-dressing caused by 'good-excellent'. For that reason, this recommendation is no longer topical, because the discussion about whether a study programme is up to standard or not and if there are noteworthy deficiencies, was adequately implemented in the assessment frameworks of 2011, 2014 and 2016. It now serves as the primary basis for assessments in the 2018 assessment framework.

- In addition, in the 2022 review sessions with panel members, they pointed out that they feel very confident in the way they handle the criteria in a correct way. They also mentioned that if they have any questions in this respect, they are adequately supported by the auditors, who apply their broad experience.

#### 8.3.4. ESG 2.6 Reporting

*NQA is recommended to publish the report on its own website or to include the link (to the NVAO database) as NQA already enunciates in its SAR*

Follow-up NQA: NQA has included [a link to the NVAO database](#) on its own website.

#### 8.3.5. ESG 2.7 Complaints and appeals

*NQA is recommended to develop a complaints procedure and communicate it to the institutions. That should include the establishment of an independent and competent commission that may handle any relevant issues.*

Follow-up NQA:

- NQA agrees with the recommendation. Therefore, the procedure was introduced in the second half of 2022. The procedure has been developed in line with the procedures of NVAO and former QANU<sup>9</sup>.
- The complaints procedure is not totally open, considering the division of authority in the Netherlands between NVAO, the audit panel and the Agency when it concerns content-related objections to the assessment. The complaints procedure will only be open to objections lodged against assessment procedures followed by NQA and/or the panel and only if the 'hearing both sides consultation' is carried out. The judgement of the audit panel is not open to discussion unless procedural mistakes have led to an incorrect or incomplete assessment. In that case, part of the assessment or the whole assessment will be conducted again by the panel or in exceptional circumstances, by a completely new panel (only when NVAO agrees with such a measure).

## 9. SWOT analysis

Analyse the agency's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

<p><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- NQA is a strong brand within the sector of universities of applied sciences,</li> <li>- Its profile on assessments of degree programmes (focus on content, rather than on processes) is well-known in the field and acknowledged by its clients, NVAO and panel members,</li> <li>- NQA's approach and working methods is in accordance with the relevant frameworks,</li> <li>- The staff members of NQA are all well qualified and well equipped for their work,</li> <li>- High satisfaction of our clients (evaluations degree programmes and account evaluations) and NVAO (expressed consultations),</li> <li>- NQA has shown to be able to adopt very quickly to changes and updates of the relevant systems and frameworks,</li> <li>- NQA appears to be strong in tenders,</li> <li>- NQA is an attractive employer,</li> <li>- NQA has an effective set of tools for safeguarding and improving the quality of its activities.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Weaknesses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Despite our strong position as an assessment agency and our portfolio of conducted assessments, our influence on the level of the accreditation system is highly limited,</li> <li>- NQA depends on the visitation schedule of the NVAO, which leads to peaks and valleys in our project calendar and thus on our turnover. This schedule has been changed recently and diminishes the peaks and valleys from 2023 onwards,</li> <li>- The strong brand within universities of applied sciences together with a lack of staff members with elaborate experience in conducting reviews within research universities makes it very difficult to obtain a position within research universities,</li> <li>- NQA is a small organisation, which makes it vulnerable to staff-turnover and illness of staff members.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Opportunities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The assessments of degree programmes of the research universities were nearly exclusively conducted by one assessment agency that has gone bankrupt. This creates opportunities,</li> <li>- Our portfolio of research evaluations is growing, and our performance is better than our competitors as confirmed by CEKO. With this expertise, a (small) further grow of this activity could be achieved,</li> <li>- Presenting new support and forms of assessments when the development towards institutional assessments becomes more elaborated.</li> <li>- Develop frameworks and conduct assessments for professional associations</li> </ul>	<p><b>Threats</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Developments regarding the system of external quality assurance are difficult to influence, partly because this is a political issue. Changes regarding the position of assessment agencies could affect us directly,</li> <li>- It is inherent to our position as an assessment agency that insufficient assessment results can influence the reputation of NQA,</li> <li>- More clients have decided to use tenders to choose between agencies. This results in price pressure,</li> <li>- The ongoing discussion on 'the administrative burden' of the system of accreditation and institutional assessments, can result in a 'race to the bottom' within the system. We feel the framework will lose valuable elements to ensure this even more, because the discussion about institutional assessments is more and more politicized where facts do not seem to matter anymore.</li> </ul>

## 10. Key challenges and areas for future development

### *Introduction*

The Dutch government has recently (28 September 2022) decided that an institutional assessments framework will be introduced in 2025 or 2026. The framework to conduct these institutional assessments will be developed in 2023-2024. At this moment much is uncertain and unknown, specifically how to ensure the quality of programmes and to comply with the ESG. However, institutional assessments will be introduced. Therefore, NQA has renewed and formulated its ambitions for 2023-2028 in October 2022.<sup>13</sup>

### *Three ambitions*

NQA has formulated three main ambitions:

1. NQA is seen as the (measured in their quality of assessments) best, most innovative and service-oriented agency regarding programme and research assessments within higher education
2. NQA is also recognized as an agency in higher education that can support institutions and programmes in securing their quality and affiliated consultancy services
3. NQA is recognized as an agency that develops assessment frameworks for professional associations to improve the quality of their profession and is asked to conduct these assessments.

### *Key challenges to realize these ambitions*

In the document 'Ambitions 2023-2028' the way NQA wants to realize these ambitions has been elaborated. In this chapter we only mention the key success factors to realize our ambitions.

These are:

- Maintaining the quality and quantity of our staff at senior level in a tight labour market and under the pressure of competitors that have staff members at lower costs.
- Maintaining and developing our quality of assessments within a competitive market in which some clients approach assessments as a commodity and competitors conduct assessments different from our quality standards
- Developing support and the assessments in line with the challenges the introduction of the institutional assessment framework will yield (see: ambitions 2023-2028).
- Developing the existing consultancy services further and adding new ones to the portfolio.
- Giving exposure to our newly developed support for professional associations on our website and in mailing these associations what NQA can offer in this regard.

These main challenges are partly developed in a continuous process and partly explicitly assigned to employees or organized in an project. Every year the result of our ISO-audit confirms that NQA realizes what has to be developed and planned. This fluent way fits in the culture of NQA. With respect to the major changes the institutional assessment framework will trigger, several projects will be set up.

## Glossary of Terms

CEKO	Commissie Evaluatie Kwaliteitszorg Onderwijs ( <i>Evaluation Quality Management Education Commission</i> )
VKO	Validatiecommissie Kwaliteitszorg Onderzoek ( <i>Validation Commission Quality Management Research</i> )
NVAO	the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation
UoC	University of Curaçao
UNA	University of the Netherlands Antilles
CDHO	Higher Education Efficiency Committee

## Annexes

### *Annexes sent with the Self-evaluation Report*

- NVAO (2018) Assessment Framework for the Higher Education Accreditation System of the Netherlands (Annex Self-evaluation Report)
- NQA (2022) Manual audit panel for Audit Visits in Higher Education (in portal named and factual title of the document: Manual 2022 Audit panel study programme audits in higher education)
- NQA (2022) Guidebook for assessments in higher education (In portal named and factual title of the document: Manual Study Programme Audit Site Visits Higher Vocational Education 2022 Limited Study Programme Audit)
- NQA (2022) *Ambitions 2023-2028*

### *Annexes available to the panel through a password-protected NQA-portal to protect the confidentiality of the information*

- NQA (2022) *Deeltijdonderwijs aan de hand van Leeruitkomsten*
- NVAO (2022) *Accreditatiebeoordeling opleidingen met experimenteervarianten – V11febr21*
- NQA (2022) *Feedback bijeenkomst panelleden*
- NQA (2020) *Kwaliteitsmanagementsysteem*
- NQA (2018) *Richtlijnen Terugkoppeling*
- NQA (2022) *Handleiding studentpanellid*
- NQA (2022) *Klachten- en bezwaarprocedure NQA (Complaints and Appeal procedure)*
- NQA (2019) *Reactie op NVAO brief AVG*
- NQA (2019) *Onafhankelijkheid voorzitters panel*
- NQA (2020) *Visitaties tijdens Covid maatregelen (instruction for interna land external audit auditors)*
- NQA (2020) *Visiteren in Corona-tijd (information for programme management)*
- NVAO (2019) *Reactie NVAO op onafhankelijkheid secretaris*
- NQA (2020) *Ruimte binnen de bestaande kaders, discussie notitie instellingsaccreditatie gezamenlijke evaluatiebureaus t.b.v. OCW*
- NQA (2019) *Onafhankelijkheid voorzitters panel*
- NQA (2019) *Rapportage sectorschema Opleidingen Verloskunde*
- NQA (2022) *Financiële resultaten NQA 2017-2021*
- NQA (2021) *Inwerkprogramma Auditoren*
- NQA (2020) *Addition to the follow-up report ENQA review*