



**Roskilde  
University**

## **QANU - Quality Assurance Netherlands Universities**

Self-assessment report

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**QANU – Quality Assurance Netherlands Universities**

# **Self-assessment report**

**May 2016**

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## Preface

In its meeting on 17 June 2015, QANU's board discussed whether QANU should aim at renewing its membership of ENQA, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. It was well aware of the fact that an assessment by an ENQA Review Team is a necessary condition for a renewal of QANU's membership. An ENQA assessment is quite an undertaking for a small organisation such as QANU.

The main reason for QANU to pursue a renewal of its ENQA membership (and its EQAR registration) is that QANU wants to show that its activities conform to international standards (i.e., the European Standards and Guidelines).

Even though the national system of external quality assurance was revised twice since QANU's previous assessment in October 2010 and the discussion about the ideal design of this system is ongoing, QANU has been able to maintain its position as the most important quality assurance agency for the university sector in the Netherlands and as a knowledgeable and reliable partner for policy makers. QANU still conducts the vast majority of the assessments of degree programmes offered by the Dutch research universities and a significant part of the assessments of research units. QANU also contributes to the discussions about the development of the system of external quality assurance on the basis of its expertise and experience. QANU is firmly embedded in the structure of the system of external quality assurance in the Netherlands.

The most important component of the preparations for an external assessment is a conscientious self-assessment. The process of self-assessment, which has resulted in this report, has stimulated QANU's board and staff to once more reflect upon the strengths and weaknesses of the organisation and the approach it has adopted for assessments of degree programmes and research units, on the threats it faces, but also on the opportunities it has within its reach.

Over the years, representatives of degree programmes and research units have repeatedly told QANU's staff members that writing a self-assessment report is a time-consuming, but useful experience. Both the board and the staff can once again confirm that this is indeed the case. QANU believes that it has been able to make its strategy for the future more explicit and focused as a result of this process of self-assessment.

Utrecht, 2 May 2016

Peter van Lieshout  
chairman of the board

Sietze Looijenga  
director



## **1. Introduction: QANU in a nutshell**

QANU is a quality assurance agency based in Utrecht, in the centre of the Netherlands. Its key objective is to assess degree programmes and research units offered by Dutch universities. QANU contributes to the national system of external quality assurance in three ways. First, it provides insight in the quality of education and research, thus enabling universities to account for their activities. Second, it contributes to quality improvement of the programmes it assesses by providing advice, suggestions for improvement and recommendations. Third, it contributes to discussions about the further development of the system of external quality assurance.

QANU uses essentially the same approach for all its assessments. It supports panels of independent experts (peers) that assess degree programmes and research units on the basis of a self-evaluation report provided by the programmes and information gathered in a series of interviews during a site visit. The panels of experts have the necessary knowledge, expertise and experience to provide a reliable and accurate programme assessment. QANU has a lot of experience with conducting national (clustered) assessments of all programmes in a specific discipline. This approach enhances the reliability and mutual comparability of the panel's conclusions and gives programmes the opportunity to learn from each other's best practices.

The panels of experts are supported by QANU's staff members, professional and competent project managers who are familiar with academic education and research and with various systems of internal quality assurance.





## 2. Development of the self-assessment report

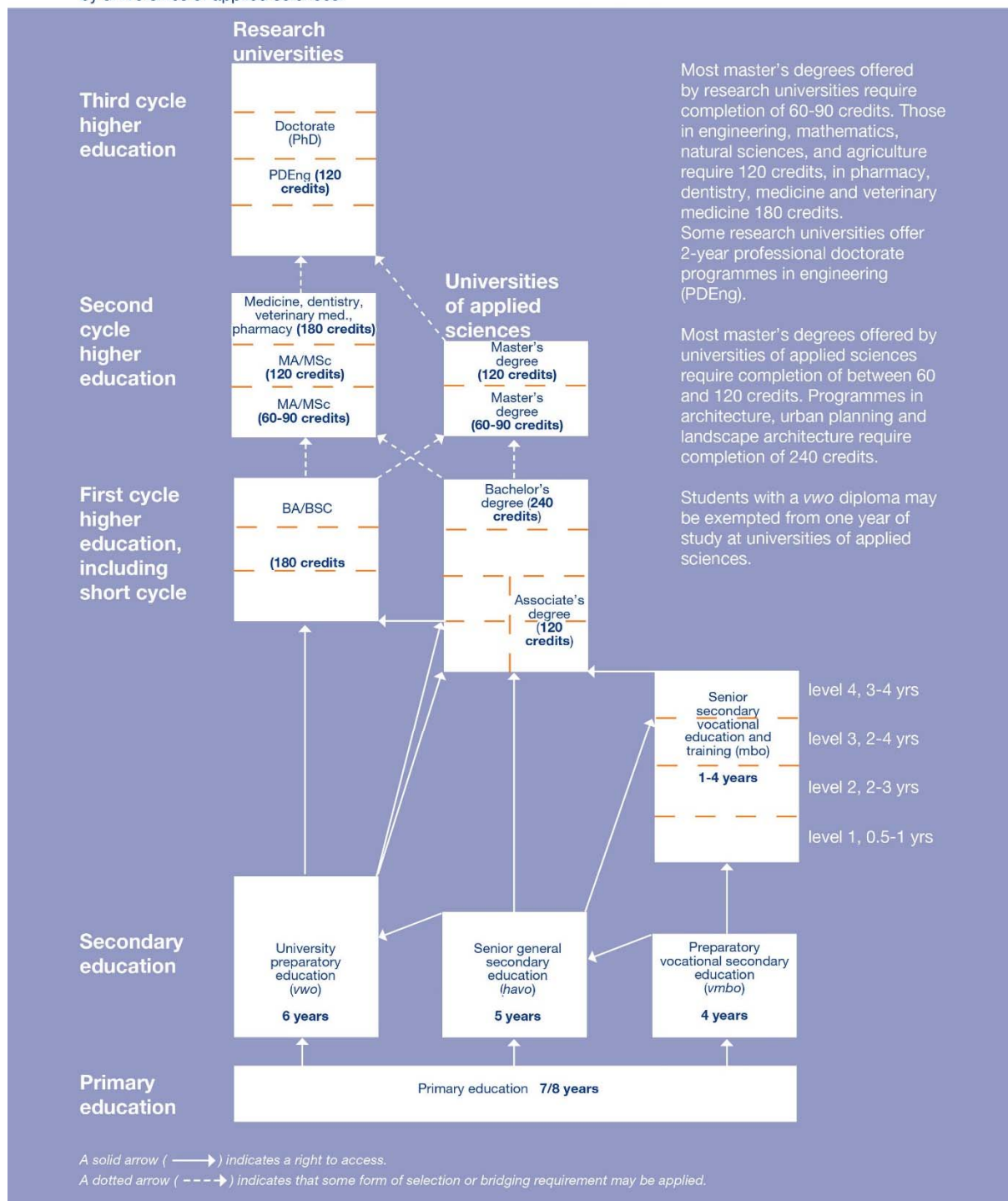
This self-assessment report was produced as a joint effort by QANU's director and staff members under the final responsibility of QANU's board. The report follows the structure laid down in ENQA's *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* (October 2015). All staff members contributed to the report. Various project managers produced, edited or commented on draft versions of the chapters in this report. The chapter containing the SWOT-analysis draws heavily on two lunch meetings in which QANU's staff members discussed the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats as they perceive them.

The materials used as sources for this self-assessment report include policy papers, annual reports, external documents such as the official assessment frameworks QANU uses as the starting point for its assessments, internal documents laying down the details of the procedures applied by QANU, and the results of evaluations.

The board of QANU discussed and approved the self-assessment report in its meeting on 6 April 2016. QANU's director produced the current version of the report, which takes into account the comments from ENQA's reviews manager.

# The Dutch education system

The higher education system in the Netherlands is based on a three-cycle degree system, consisting of a bachelor, master and PhD. Two types of programmes are offered: research-oriented degree programmes offered by research universities, and professional higher education programmes offered by universities of applied sciences.



Source: <http://www.studyinholland.nl>.

### 3. Higher education and quality assurance of higher education in the Netherlands

#### 3.1. Higher education in the Netherlands

The structure of higher education in the Netherlands is laid down in the Act on Higher Education and Scientific Research (in Dutch: *Wet op het Hoger onderwijs en Wetenschappelijk onderzoek*, abbreviated as *WHW*). This Act, which was adopted by Parliament in 1993, has been subject to several revisions and additions over the last 20 years, partly as a result of the introduction of the bachelor's and master's programmes and accreditation (both resulting from the Bologna Declaration that was adopted in 1999).

The binary higher education system in the Netherlands consists of two sectors, the university sector (in Dutch: *wetenschappelijk onderwijs*, abbreviated as *wo*) and the sector of higher professional education (in Dutch: *hoger beroepsonderwijs*, abbreviated as *hbo*). Universities and institutions of higher professional education (in Dutch: *hogescholen*) each have their own focus on education, as defined in the Act on Higher Education and Scientific Research: universities prepare students for independent scientific work in an academic or professional setting and *hogescholen* prepare students for a specific profession or occupation and enable them to function self-consciously in society at large. Universities are commonly referred to as *research universities*, institutions of higher professional education are generally called *universities of applied sciences*.<sup>1</sup>

There are 14 research universities in the Netherlands, including the Open University, which specialises in providing distance learning programmes. These universities currently have approximately 260,000 students. They are public institutions that receive government funding. In addition, a number of "designated institutions" are considered part of the university sector. These include a university for business administration, four institutes for theology and a humanistic university. Apart from the university for business administration, these institutions are publicly funded as well. There are 37 universities of applied sciences that receive government funding. These institutions have almost 450,000 students. Lastly, there are several private institutions that offer programmes at *hbo*-level (and do not receive public funding).

Prospective students can acquire the entrance qualifications for higher education in two tracks in secondary education: senior general secondary education, a track of five years (in Dutch: *hoger algemeen voortgezet onderwijs* or *havo*), and university preparatory education, a track of six years (in Dutch: *voorbereidend wetenschappelijk onderwijs* or *vwo*). By law, prospective students with a *vwo*-degree have access to programmes offered both by research universities and by universities of applied sciences. The only limitations to this principle of "open access" are the profile requirements which may hold for a programme (cf. the next paragraph) and the system of *numerus fixus*, which only applies to a limited number of programmes. Prospective students with a *havo*-degree have direct access to programmes offered by universities of applied sciences. In addition, prospective students with a *havo*-degree who have completed the first year of a programme at a university of applied sciences or who have obtained a bachelor's degree in such a programme also have direct access to programmes offered by research universities.

Pupils in secondary education choose a profile which prepares them for a specific set of degree programmes in higher education. There are four profiles: culture and society (preparing in general for programmes in the social sciences, history, languages and culture), economics and society (preparing for programmes in economics and social sciences), nature and health (preparing for programmes in medical sciences and biology), and nature and technology (preparing for programmes in natural sciences and engineering).

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<sup>1</sup> This convention will be followed in this self-assessment report in order to make a distinction between *universiteiten* and *hogescholen*. When this report refers to *universities*, this should be read as *research universities*.

Dutch higher education has three cycles: bachelor's programmes, master's programmes and postgraduate programmes, including programmes leading to a PhD degree.

- Bachelor's programmes with a professional orientation (typically offered by universities of applied sciences) aim at preparing students for a career in professional practice. Students obtain a level of general and specific knowledge and additional skills needed for independent professional practice. The curriculum of this type of programme has a practical orientation and includes work placements. These programmes have a workload of 240 EC and a curriculum of four years.
- Bachelor's programmes with an academic orientation (typically offered by research universities and designated institutions) aim at transferring academic and discipline-specific knowledge and skills. In practice, they prepare students for a continuation of their studies at master's level. These programmes have a workload of at least 180 EC and a curriculum of three years.
- Master's programmes with a professional orientation (typically offered by universities of applied sciences) aim at more complex situations in the professional practice. The workload of their curricula amounts to at least 60 EC. Generally, these programmes do not receive public funding. As a rule, programmes that have successfully applied for public funding prepare students for professions with considerable social significance, for example in education or health and welfare.
- Master's programmes with an academic orientation (typically offered by research universities and designated institutions) aim at preparing students for an advanced level of subject or discipline-specific knowledge and skills. Their academic orientation is dominant, but many have a professional orientation as well. The curricula of these programmes comprise at least 60 EC. Programmes in the natural and engineering sciences have a curriculum of 120 EC. In a limited number of cases (for instance, in medical sciences), the curriculum is 180 EC. Master's programmes with an academic orientation receive public funding.
- Research master's programmes (offered by research universities) aim to prepare students for a career in research in the humanities and the social sciences. The workload is 120 EC. Research universities can only offer these programmes with a special approval from the Minister<sup>2</sup> of Education.
- PhD training programmes (offered by research universities) enable PhD candidates to acquire a PhD degree. The degree is granted by a committee of researchers on the basis of a PhD thesis in which candidates demonstrate that they have acquired the ability to conduct scientific research and that they are able to contribute to the scientific body of knowledge in a discipline. PhD training programmes consist of courses and (mostly individual) supervision and instruction of PhD candidates. PhD candidates spend three or four years conducting research and following courses geared towards their individual needs and ambitions in preparation of their thesis.

### 3.2. Quality assurance of higher education in the Netherlands

#### *Until 2002: QA as a responsibility of the sector of higher education*

The system of external quality assurance for degree programmes in higher education in the Netherlands was initiated in the 1980's by the Association of research universities in the Netherlands (in Dutch: the *VSNU* or *Vereniging van samenwerkende Nederlandse universiteiten*). A few years later, the Netherlands association of universities of applied sciences (in Dutch: the *HBO-raad*, now called the *Vereniging Hogescholen*) adopted a similar system for the programmes offered by the universities of applied sciences. These systems of quality assurance served two main purposes:

- accountability: to verify whether degree programmes met generic quality standards laid down in an assessment framework;
- quality improvement: to provide advice and recommendations for further improvement of the degree programme.

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<sup>2</sup> The Minister heads the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. For the sake of brevity, this report will refer to the Minister and the Ministry of Education.

The assessments were carried out by panels of experts (peers) who were appointed by the respective associations. These panels, supported by staff members of the associations, reported to the boards of the associations. The association of universities also organised assessments of research programmes, serving the same purposes as the assessments of degree programmes.

Essentially, the assessments of degree programmes at research universities and universities of applied sciences followed the same procedure. The programmes carried out a self-evaluation on the basis of an assessment framework and described the outcomes in a self-evaluation report. The association convened a panel that studied the self-evaluation reports and conducted a site visit to interview stakeholders and to study additional materials. At the end of the site visit, the panel formulated its preliminary conclusions and recommendations. After the site visit, the secretary of the panel produced a report containing the panel's findings. The panel members had the opportunity to comment on this draft report. The secretary submitted the report approved by the panel to the programmes described to check for factual errors or inconsistencies. The panel received the response from the programmes and decided whether to implement the comments before it completed and approved the final version of the report.

Programme assessments at research universities were conducted at the level of a discipline as a whole when possible. As a rule, an assessment panel produced a report describing all the programmes it had assessed. The reports were made public in print and on the association's website. Most reports contained a comparative overview of the programmes assessed and an analysis of the state of the art in the discipline. In general, the panels formulated recommendations aimed at improving aspects of the quality of the programmes and at a further development of the discipline at a national level. The reports never contained (nor pretended to present) explicit rankings of programmes in a specific discipline.

The external quality assurance system itself was assessed by the Inspectorate of Education (in Dutch: *Inspectie van het Onderwijs*). It also checked whether programmes that were assessed as poor had implemented the recommendations put forward by the panel two years after the publication of the report.

### ***2002: the introduction of accreditation***

In 2002, the Act on Higher Education and Scientific Research was amended to include accreditation. In the amended 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 recognised degrees.

One of the consequences of the amendment 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 both associations were transformed to independent organisations that continued the work of the associations in the area of external quality assurance. In 2004, QANU came into being, emerging from the association of research universities. NQA, another quality assurance agency in the Netherlands which is mainly active in the sector of the universities of applied sciences, emerged from the association of universities of applied sciences.

The amendment of the Act on Higher Education and Scientific Research led to the establishment of the NAO, the Dutch Accreditation Organisation (in Dutch: *Nederlandse Accreditatie Organisatie*), which received the legal power to award accreditation to programmes which fulfil the conditions laid down in the amended Act. In 2003, the Dutch and Flemish ministers of education signed a treaty on accreditation, which resulted in the establishment of a binational accreditation organisation for the Netherlands and Flanders, the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation (in Dutch: *Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatie Organisatie* or NVAO). The NVAO is responsible for the development of assessment frameworks that serve as the starting point for assessments in the Netherlands and Flanders. These frameworks adhere to national legislation.

The Dutch system of external quality assurance that was introduced in 2003 can be characterised as a two-tier system. The NVAO decides whether an existing degree programme is re-accredited,

but it does not assess existing degree programmes itself. The assessments are conducted by quality assurance agencies, including those that emerged from the associations of research universities and universities of applied sciences, at the request of institutions of higher education. The agencies support assessment panels made up of independent experts. The panel's assessment is laid down in a report containing a conclusion on whether the programme fulfils the conditions for accreditation. This conclusion is an advice to the NVAO, that has the legal power to award accreditation. The board of the institution of higher education submits the application for a renewal of accreditation to the NVAO, together with the panel's report. If the NVAO decides that a programme fulfils the criteria, the accreditation is prolonged for another six years.

The assessment framework serving as the starting point for assessments of existing degree programmes contained 21 standards that were divided into six themes. The NVAO had developed a separate procedure for the accreditation of new degree programmes, the Initial accreditation framework, that was very similar to the one for existing degree programmes. Instead of a theme Results, it contained a theme Conditions for continuity.

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 existing degree programmes. According to the framework<sup>3</sup> (p. 12), "accreditation is granted after NVAO has validated an external assessment, carried out by a quality assessment agency at the request of the institution." The NVAO published a list of agencies on its website that fulfilled the requirements for conducting assessments. Agencies on this list were required to report to the NVAO on an annual basis about the activities carried out, the procedures and working methods used et cetera.

### ***2011: the introduction of institutional quality assessments***

The external quality assurance system was revised twice since 2003, following amendments of the Act on Higher Education and Scientific Research. The first revision led to the introduction of new assessment frameworks as of 1 January 2011. The most important change was the introduction of the institutional quality assurance assessment. If an institution applies for and passes this assessment, its degree programmes are assessed on the basis of a framework for limited programme assessments. If an institution fails or does not apply for an institutional assessment, its programmes are assessed on the basis of a framework for extensive programme assessments.

The main reasons for the introduction of the institutional quality assurance assessment were that institutions felt that the amount of work involved in a programme assessment (the 'administrative burden') was too high and that the programme assessments focused too strongly on procedures and processes instead of the contents of a programme. It was argued that the aspects of a programme that are not programme-specific (e.g., the system of quality assurance and the human resource policy, both of which are usually defined at the level of a faculty or a university as a whole) should be considered in an institutional quality assurance assessment. If assessed positively, the institution has proved itself to be in control of these aspects and the positive assessment is considered valid for all programmes offered by the institution. As a result, programme assessments can focus specifically on the contents and execution of a programme. In addition, it was assumed that the amount of work involved in a programme assessment would be reduced considerably because the aspects mentioned would not be assessed any longer.

Shortly after the assessment frameworks came into effect, it became clear that one of the universities of applied sciences had violated the requirements for awarding degrees. This institution made it possible for students of a limited number of programmes who had problems completing their studies, to obtain a degree via an alternative graduation route. This so-called *hbo-affaire* led to a series of discussions in the House of Representatives and to an amendment of the Act on Higher Education and Scientific Research (see below).

Responding to the discussions in House of Representatives, the NVAO introduced a guideline for the assessment of final projects (such as theses) during external assessments in July 2011, which

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<sup>3</sup> NVAO (2003), *Accreditation Framework, the Netherlands*, 14 February 2003.

was not part of the formal assessment framework, but which plays an important role in assessments of degree programmes ever since.

Institutional quality assurance assessments are conducted exclusively by the NVAO. Since of 1 January 2011, initial assessments are also carried out exclusively by the NVAO.

The assessment frameworks that came into effect in 2011 clearly stated that “the institution convenes the panel, appoints a secretary and subsequently presents the panel to NVAO for approval (p. 19)”.<sup>4</sup> This means that institutions are ultimately responsible for convening the panels that assess their degree programmes and that the NVAO verifies whether these panels have the required expertise and experience and fulfil the requirements for independence. Alternatively, institutions “may also commission an external quality assessment agency to convene a panel; in such cases the panel must also be presented to NVAO for approval” (p. 19).<sup>5</sup>

Since 2011, institutions of higher education are no longer obliged to involve a quality assurance agency for the assessments of their degree programmes. According to the NVAO’s assessment framework, the assessment panel “is assisted by an independent, external secretary trained and certified by NVAO. The secretary does not sit on the panel” (p. 20).<sup>6</sup> Institutions of higher education are allowed to carry out all the preparations for an assessment themselves. They are, however, obliged to appoint an external secretary for the assessment panel and to ensure that this secretary is independent and has completed a training offered by the NVAO. In practice, institutions of higher education still commission quality assurance agencies such as QANU to conduct the preparations for the assessments of their degree programmes. The staff members of these agencies have all successfully completed the NVAO’s training and are qualified to act as secretary of an assessment panel.

### ***2015: the introduction of assessment groups and even more attention for assessment***

Discussions in the House of Representatives following the *hbo-affaire* led to another amendment of the Act on Higher Education and Scientific Research and, as a consequence, to a revised version of the NVAO’s frameworks for assessments of existing degree programmes. The most important changes in the assessment frameworks were the introduction of assessment groups and the division of a single standard on assessment and acquired learning outcomes into two separate standards, one concerning (the system of) assessment, the other concerning acquired learning outcomes.

The main reason for introducing assessment groups is that it allows for benchmarking: when an assessment panel assesses degree programmes in the same discipline offered by different institutions, a panel is able to develop a comparative view of the quality of the programmes, to identify and position strengths and weaknesses in a broader context. As a result, it will be less likely that a panel assesses a programme that has serious weaknesses as ‘satisfactory’ (or a programme that has minor weaknesses as ‘unsatisfactory’), because it is in a position to compare the weaknesses to those of other programmes.

The division of the standard on assessment and acquired learning outcomes is the result of the increased attention for assessment and for the position and work of the Board of Examiners. The tasks of this board are listed explicitly in the Act on Higher Education and Scientific Research. By separating assessment and achieved learning outcomes, it is no longer possible for an assessment panel to argue that weaknesses or shortcomings in the system of assessment are compensated by well-perceived achieved learning outcomes, in particular the quality of theses produced by recent graduates.

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<sup>4</sup> NVAO (2011), *Assessment frameworks for the higher education accreditation system. Programme assessment (limited)*, 22 November 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Idem.

<sup>6</sup> Idem.



In addition to the revisions described above, the frameworks underwent other revisions to reduce the perceived administrative burden. The amount of standards in the framework for extensive programme assessment was reduced from 16 to 11. The maximum number of pages to be used for a critical reflection (a self-assessment report) was reduced, from 25 to 15 for programmes undergoing a limited assessment and from 40 to 20 for programmes undergoing an extensive assessment. The required documentation to be provided, including quantitative data relating to success rates, was reduced as well.

The standards in the framework for institutional quality assurance assessments were not affected by the most recent revision of the NVAO's assessment frameworks. These standards are:

#### **Standards for an institutional quality assurance assessment<sup>7</sup>**

##### **Vision of the quality of the education provided**

*Standard 1:* The institution has a broadly supported vision of the quality of its education and the development of a quality culture.

##### **Policy**

*Standard 2:* The institution pursues an adequate policy in order to realise its vision of the quality of its education. This comprises at least: policies in the field of education, staff, facilities, accessibility and feasibility for students with a functional disability, embedding of research in the education provided, as well as the interrelation between education and the (international) professional field and discipline.

##### **Output**

*Standard 3:* The institution has insight into the extent to which its vision of the quality of its education is realised. It gauges and evaluates the quality of its programmes on a regular basis, among students, staff, alumni and representatives of the professional field.

##### **Improvement policy**

*Standard 4:* The institution can demonstrate that it systematically improves the quality of its programmes wherever required.

##### **Organisation and decision-making structure**

*Standard 5:* The institution has an effective organisation and decision-making structure with regard to the quality of its programmes, which clearly defines the tasks, authorities and responsibilities and which encompasses the participation of students and staff.

The assessment framework for limited programme assessments currently has four standards:

#### **Standards for a limited programme assessment<sup>8</sup>**

##### **Intended learning outcomes**

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

##### **Teaching-learning environment**

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

##### **Assessment**

*Standard 3:* The programme has an adequate assessment system in place.

<sup>7</sup> NVAO (2014), *Assessment frameworks for the higher education accreditation system in the Netherlands*, 19 December 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Idem.

**Achieved learning outcomes**

*Standard 4:* The programme demonstrates that the intended learning outcomes are achieved.

The framework for extensive programme assessments currently has 11 standards:

**Standards for an extensive programme assessment<sup>9</sup>****Intended learning outcomes**

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

**Curriculum**

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

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

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

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

**Staff**

*Standard 6:* The staff is qualified and the size of the staff is sufficient for the realisation of the curriculum in terms of content, educational expertise and organisation.

**Services and facilities**

*Standard 7:* The accommodation and the facilities (infrastructure) are sufficient for the realisation of the curriculum.

*Standard 8:* Tutoring and student information provision bolster students' progress and tie in with the needs of students.

**Quality assurance**

*Standard 9:* The programme is evaluated on a regular basis, partly on the basis of assessable targets.

**Assessment**

*Standard 10:* The programme has an adequate assessment system in place.

**Learning outcomes achieved**

*Standard 11:* The programme demonstrates that the intended learning outcomes are achieved.

The external quality assurance system that was in place since 2011 was evaluated thoroughly in 2013. The Minister summarised the outcomes of these evaluations in a letter to the House of Representatives from September 2013. She concluded that the system was generally appropriate and worked well, but that it still had issues that were in need of improvement. For instance, the perceived administrative burden had not been reduced with the introduction of institutional assessments. Discussions and disagreements about the reliability of assessments had remained. As a result, the support for the system of quality assurance, in particular among research universities, was under considerable pressure. The Minister announced that she intended to introduce small revisions in the system that resulted in quick wins and that she also wanted to initiate a more fundamental discussion about the design of the system. In the Minister's opinion, it was important to increase trust, to exert less control on institutions that had performed well, to develop a limited

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<sup>9</sup> Idem.

version of accreditation for such institutions. The quick wins were integrated in the Act and in the assessment frameworks that became effective on 1 January 2015.

### ***2016: assessments as a responsibility of institutions of higher education?***

In the course of 2014, a number of research universities initiated a discussion about the future design of the system of external quality assurance. They argued that the system should be revised more fundamentally to reflect the trust in the quality of their programmes, which they deserved after three rounds of accreditation. According to these universities, a system with institutional accreditation should be considered. The institutional assessment leading to accreditation would be an extended and more comprehensive version of the current institutional assessment. The degree programmes offered by accredited institutions would no longer have to undergo an external assessment leading to accreditation. Instead, the assessments of degree programmes would be integrated in their internal quality assurance processes. As a result, it would no longer be necessary to organise external programme assessments.

The Minister of Education installed an advisory group in 2014 to elaborate on the future design of the system of external quality assurance. This advisory group produced a report that was sent to the House of Representatives on 1 June 2015 with a letter from the Minister informing the members of the House of Representatives about her intentions for the further development of the system of external quality assurance. In line with the advisory group's conclusions, the Minister proposed to develop a pilot for institutional accreditation. Institutional accreditation would grant institutions the right to bear responsibility for the quality assurance of their existing degree programmes. These programmes would no longer have to be accredited by an external organisation such as the NVAO. Several parties in the House of Representatives objected to this proposal, arguing that the only way to guarantee the quality of the programmes and the value of the degrees awarded was to preserve assessments by external, independent peers and accreditation.

On 18 February 2016, the Minister sent another letter to the House of Representatives, outlaying her revised plans for the development of the external quality assurance system. These plans amount to a pilot combining an institutional assessment leading to institutional accreditation and a leaner form of programme assessment in which only the first and the fourth standard (dealing with the intended learning outcomes and the achieved learning outcomes) are assessed. At the time of writing, the Minister's proposal has not yet been discussed in the House of Representatives.

### ***The assessment of research units and PhD training programmes***

Until now, the Dutch House of Representatives has not felt the need to legally regulate the assessment of research units. The starting point for research assessments is not the Act on Higher Education and Scientific Research, but a protocol developed by VSNU (the association of universities), KNAW (the Royal Academy of Sciences) and NWO (the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research). The Standard Evaluation Protocol is also used to assess the research conducted within institutes that are part of or linked to the KNAW or NWO. It has been revised a couple of times since its introduction. The current version (the fifth) is valid from 2015 until 2021.

The primary aim of assessments based on the Standard Evaluation Protocol is "to reveal and confirm the quality and the relevance of the research to society and to improve these where necessary" (p. 5). The object of assessment is a 'research unit'.<sup>10</sup> A research unit may be a research group, a research institute, a research cluster or all the research carried out within a faculty. An assessment committee assesses the research unit on three assessment criteria: research quality, relevance to society and viability. In addition to these criteria, an assessment takes at least two further aspects into consideration: PhD training programmes and research

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<sup>10</sup> The current version of the SEP focuses more strongly on the assessment of research units, while previous versions primarily aimed at the assessment of research programmes. For the sake of convenience, this report will use the phrase 'research unit', even though the phrase 'research programme' may be more appropriate for assessments based on previous versions of the SEP.

integrity. The committee assesses the first three criteria as 'excellent', 'very good', 'good' or 'unsatisfactory'. It assesses the additional aspects in a qualitative way only.

A research unit produces a self-assessment report that serves as the basis of its assessment. It reflects on its PhD training programmes in this self-assessment report and on how it supervises its PhD candidates. The assessment committee discusses this during the site visit, comments on this in its report, and makes recommendations for improvement. Where research units cooperate within the context of a graduate school or research school, they will preferably present their PhD training programmes collectively and in the same way. Where necessary, a separate external committee can be called in to assess a national or inter-university research school.

The large majority of PhD candidates are employees of a university or a research institute linked to KNAW or NWO. PhD candidates are identified as a category of staff members in its own right in the Collective Labour Agreement of Dutch Universities. The Collective Labour Agreement prescribes that the PhD candidate's employer produces a Training and Guidance Plan, which lists at least:<sup>11</sup>

- a. what knowledge and skills must be acquired and how this should be done;
- b. who shall act as mentor for the doctoral candidate, i.e. under whose supervision the doctoral candidate shall work and who shall be the promoter (...);
- c. the extent, in minimum hours per month, of personal guidance from the appointed mentor to which the doctoral candidate is entitled.

Traditionally, PhD candidates receive a contract for a period of four years. Candidates who have completed a research master's programme are more likely to receive a contract for three years.

According to the Standard Evaluation Protocol, an assessment committee considers the institutional context of the PhD training programmes, the selection and admission procedures, the programme content and structure, the supervision and the effectiveness of the programme plans and supervision plans, quality assurance, guidance of PhD candidates to the job market, duration, success rate, exit numbers, and career prospects.

Universities elaborated the requirement for a training and guidance plan in a form that lays down the arrangements made for individual PhD candidates and that has to be signed by the mentor and the PhD candidate. As a rule, such a form contains headings for guidance and supervision, for a research plan, for a training plan, and for a teaching plan.<sup>12</sup>

The main aim for a PhD candidate is to finalise a PhD thesis. Completing a PhD training programme is not an aim in itself, it is a means to achieve the main aim. PhD training programmes are geared towards the needs of individual PhD candidates, who make a selection from a range of more general courses (for example, courses on professional effectiveness, academic presentations, career orientation and application, or presentational skills)<sup>13</sup> and content-related courses offered either by the research unit to which the PhD candidate belongs or another research institute or school. The size of a typical PhD training programme will amount to approximately 30 EC, spread over a period of four years. If a PhD candidate has a contract for three years, the size of the training programme will be less. PhD candidates receive a certificate together with their PhD degree when they have successfully completed their PhD training programme.

The Training and Guidance Plan will contain a specification of the courses that a PhD candidate will follow as part of the PhD training programme.

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<sup>11</sup> VSNU, Collective Labour Agreement of Dutch Universities, 1 January 2015 to 1 July 2016, Article 6.8, p. 51.

<sup>12</sup> PhD candidates spend a maximum of 20% of their time on teaching or other tasks.

<sup>13</sup> These courses are mentioned on the form for the Training and Guidance Plan of the University of Twente, that does not seem to be available in Dutch. As an example, Appendix 7 contains the Training and Guidance Plan of VU University Amsterdam.



## 4. QANU as a quality assurance agency

### 4.1. A brief history

As described above, the Act on Higher Education and Scientific Research was amended in 2002 to include accreditation. One of the consequences of the amendment of the Act was that external quality assurance was no longer considered to be the responsibility of the sector of higher education itself. As a result, the board of the Association of universities in the Netherlands, decided in December 2002 that its department of quality assurance would be transformed into an independent organisation, a foundation without formal links with any of the Dutch research universities: Quality Assurance Netherlands Universities (QANU) was formally founded on 3 February 2004. It was agreed that QANU would continue the activities undertaken by the VSNU's department of quality assurance, but that universities were not obliged to use QANU's services.

In the first years after the introduction of accreditation, QANU assessed all degree programmes offered by universities. After a few years, a number of universities decided to engage other quality assurance agencies as well, because they wanted to be able to take a well-considered decision about the organisation of their assessments. Until now, QANU has conducted all larger assessments, assessments of clusters of degree programmes in which more than three universities participate, and more than 80% of the smaller assessments of degree programmes.

QANU's first board consisted of five members with considerable experience in higher education. Most of these board members served three terms of office and were active until 2011 or 2012. The members of the current board have similar profiles: the chair is Peter van Lieshout (former member of the Scientific Council for Government Policy), the other members are Jaap Zwemmer (vice-chair and treasurer and former rector of the University of Amsterdam), Gerry Wakker (dean of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Groningen), Guy Aelterman (former Head of Office at the Flemish Ministry of Education), Arie Nieuwenhuijzen Kruseman (former rector of Maastricht University) and Paul Rullmann (former member of the Board of Delft University of Technology).

The activities carried out by QANU since 2003 are described in more detail below.

### 4.2. Profile

QANU's statutes describe its aims, its working methods, its target groups and its management structure. In accordance with the statutes, QANU's mission is formulated as follows:

QANU contributes to the further improvement of the quality of scientific education and research in the Netherlands by organising and coordinating assessments by peers of scientific degree and research programmes on behalf of universities and other institutions and by conducting other activities in the area of quality assurance. QANU also utilises its expertise and experience in European and international projects and networks within scientific education and research and within other sectors outside scientific education and research.

QANU's mission reveals that QANU is first and foremost a quality assurance agency which provides services to research universities in the Netherlands. In particular, it organises and co-ordinates assessments of degree programmes and research programmes on the basis of formal frameworks that have been established by the relevant authorities. It is an independent organisation which fulfils prerequisites with respect to quality and integrity which hold for quality assurance agencies both at a national and international level. QANU is a primarily service-oriented organisation. It aims at providing tailor-made support and advice which takes specific questions or wishes from universities into account without abandoning its standards of quality and integrity.

Because QANU primarily provides services to research universities, it aims at having close and good relations with universities and with the academic community in general, at being familiar with the academic and scientific approach of education and research and at using a working method

which corresponds to that approach. QANU also aims at maintaining close functional relations with institutions and organisations in the Netherlands which have a formal role in the system of external quality assurance, such as the Ministry of Education, the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation (NVAO), the Association of universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) and the Inspectorate of Education. QANU is acquainted with relevant societal and political developments that may have an impact on its performance and approach. Although it is not among the policy-makers in the area of external quality assurance in higher education, it is a serious partner for policy-makers and it provides useful advice and recommendations on the basis of its experience and expertise.

QANU also aims at being active at the European and international level, at contributing to international projects or developments and at conforming to European and international standards.

Finally, QANU is open to deploying its expertise and experience in sectors outside higher education. The approach and the working methods used in assessments of degree programmes or research units in higher education are very similar to those used in other sectors, especially sectors that provide training or education for specific target groups or sectors that have quality standards that are a condition for recognition or funding.

### **4.3. Internal organisation**

QANU has a board, a director, a deputy director who also acts as co-ordinator of assessments of research units, a senior project manager who co-ordinates assessments of degree programmes, a staff member who co-ordinates operational matters, project managers who support assessment panels and secretarial support staff.

In accordance with the statutes, QANU's board bears overall responsibility for QANU's projects and activities and establishes QANU's policies, strategies and priorities. It legally represents the organisation as a whole. The board meets four times a year. It investigates the consequences and implications of relevant developments in higher education and quality assurance and adapts QANU's strategy and policy when necessary. In addition, the board also discusses practical issues which are directly related to QANU's projects and activities, including the quality of the reports produced by the panels supported by QANU's staff members.

QANU's board has delegated a part of its tasks and responsibilities to QANU's director, who is responsible for the executive management of the organisation and for monitoring and assuring the progress of the projects and activities carried out by QANU. In addition, the director is responsible for developing and implementing the human resources policy, for hiring new staff members and for dealing with all relevant financial issues. The director also acts as secretary of the board. He prepares the board meetings in close co-operation with the chairman of the board. He drafts policy documents for the board meetings, compiles annual reports, budgets and financial reports and co-ordinates external representational activities of the board. The chairman of the board and the director meet once a month to discuss ongoing matters.

QANU's project managers are primarily responsible for the progress and results of specific projects, but they also contribute to projects for which other project managers bear responsibility. Their tasks include co-ordinating and managing assessments of degree programmes and research units and supporting the work of assessment panels. They write reports containing the panel's assessment. They develop and monitor the planning of assessments and their budgetary control. Senior project managers contribute to the acquisition and development of new projects and to the application of QANU's approach in sectors outside higher education.

The director, the deputy director and the co-ordinator of operational matters meet every fortnight to discuss the general progress of projects, the acquisition of new projects, and the division of tasks among project managers. The director has bilateral weekly or bi-weekly meetings with the deputy director, the co-ordinator of degree programmes and the co-ordinator of operational matters. QANU's staff gathers once every fortnight for an internal meeting which has two main

purposes: providing information about relevant internal or external developments and discussing questions or problems that have arisen in projects or during site visits.

QANU is a small organisation with a limited number of project managers with a permanent position. It regularly involves freelance project managers as secretaries to deal with peaks in its activities. Freelance project managers are expected to be able to support an assessment panel during a site visit and to produce a report on the panel's findings and conclusions. QANU has a substantial number of experienced freelance project managers in its network who are familiar with its approach and who conform to the standards for quality and professionalism that QANU expects. Freelance project managers produce approximately 15% of QANU's reports.

#### 4.4. Financial position

QANU does not receive any funding or financial support from the Ministry of Education, the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation or any other institution, and is fully dependent on the revenues from assessments and other externally funded projects. QANU has adopted a financial policy to add positive results to the general operating reserve, thus creating a financial buffer that enables QANU to cover periods in which the number of projects it can acquire decreases. QANU does not want to be fully dependent on its core activities, the assessment of degree programmes and research units. It aims at compensating decreases in the number of assessments by other projects in sectors outside higher education. Until now, however, QANU has not been able to generate a substantial income from projects outside its core area of activity.

In 2015, QANU had a total turnover of € 1.132.000 after taxes and a negative result of € 360.000. In the preceding years, QANU was able to achieve positive results. Therefore, the negative result of 2015 can be covered from the operating reserves that QANU managed to build up.

QANU's financial result varies with the amount of projects it acquires and therefore with the revenues it creates. The following table shows an overview of the annual turnover, the financial result and the numbers of degree and research programmes assessed since 2010.

Year	Total turnover	Financial result
2010	€ 2.110.085	€ 19.515
2011	€ 1.626.654	€ -156.852
2012	€ 4.258.304	€ 677.213
2013	€ 4.800.838	€ 830.770
2014	€ 2.125.759	€ 41.612
2015	€ 1.132.000	€ -360.000

#### 4.5. Peaks and valleys

The negative financial result of 2015 is a direct result of the uneven distribution of assessments of degree programmes over the years. Until 2003, assessments were evenly distributed over a period of six years. This changed after the introduction of accreditation, as a result of some technical aspects of the implementation of accreditation. Since 2006, QANU has peaks and valleys in the amount of assessments it carries out and, consequently, in the number of staff members it employs and in its annual financial results. Roughly speaking, other quality assurance agencies face this problem as well and, as a consequence, the NVAO does too. This problem was well-known and generally considered to be an unwanted effect of the implementation of accreditation. In her letter to the House of Representatives of September 2013, the Minister explicitly announced that she aimed at reducing the peaks and valleys for the system as a whole.

In 2014, after the amendment of the Act on Higher Education and Scientific Research that made clustered assessments obligatory, the NVAO revised the assessment schedule in order to make



these possible. Unfortunately, the NVAO did not use this opportunity to create a more even distribution of assessments, thereby missing the opportunity to correct the situation that existed since the introduction of accreditation. Instead, the NVAO's revised assessment schedule led to a more uneven distribution of assessments, thus creating bigger differences in workload for the quality assurance agencies and the NVAO itself. The reason for this is that the NVAO decided to revise the schedule in such a way that the terms of accreditation would be lengthened for as few programmes as possible as a result of the revision. This new schedule has effects on the amount of assessments QANU will be able to conduct in the future and thereby also on QANU's financial perspective. QANU's financial buffer is currently strong enough to allow for another year with a negative result. QANU projects a positive financial result again after 2017, allowing QANU to once more strengthen its operating reserves as of 2018.

The main challenge that QANU faces as a result of the peaks and valleys is not a financial one, because QANU's financial policy makes it possible to cover the relatively quiet periods. QANU has to attract additional competent project managers for peak periods, but it is not in a position to offer them a clear and attractive perspective for the future. At the same time, QANU's project managers with a permanent position want to carry out attractive and challenging tasks in relatively quiet periods. Until now, QANU was able to face this challenge. In the 'peak period' in 2012 and 2013, it was difficult for QANU to attract sufficient competent and experienced project managers to deal with all the work that had to be carried out. QANU managed to solve the problems that arose by involving senior project managers more intensively in guidance and supervision. QANU is aware of the need to select additional project managers carefully and to start the selection process early, when new peak periods loom in the near future, but have not arrived yet. It is also aware of the need to offer its permanent project managers sufficiently challenging tasks to prevent a loss of important human capital in quiet.

QANU will continue to try to convince policy makers at the Ministry of Education, the NVAO and the VSNU that the peaks and valleys pose a threat not just to QANU, but to the system of external quality assurance in the Netherlands as a whole.

#### **4.6. Human resource management**

QANU carefully selects its project managers and offers them the opportunity to develop themselves. Newly appointed project managers are assigned a coach or mentor, one of the experienced project managers.

QANU expects its project managers to be generalists with an academic attitude who are familiar with the rules and customs of academia and who get along well with both scientists and support staff at universities. In addition, they are expected to have very good communicative skills in general and writing and editorial skills in particular, both in Dutch and in English, and to have the ability to critically reflect on their own reports and on reports produced by others. They are supposed to have a service-oriented and result-oriented attitude and to have an eye for practical issues. They are expected to have knowledge of, and to be interested in, academic education and scientific research and to have experience with working in complex administrative environments and with project management. They are pragmatic, they work efficiently and they are able to monitor the progress of a project, to act when necessary and to convince others to submit their contributions to a project on time. QANU considers expertise with assessments, audits or internal quality assurance as an added value, just like knowledge of and experience with (the system of) higher education and scientific research in the Netherlands and other relevant countries.

QANU's director conducts a cycle of performance interviews which focus on personal development. He aims at establishing a balanced division of tasks, at ensuring that staff members are not overloaded with work, sufficiently challenged and have the opportunity to further develop and enhance their knowledge, skills and qualifications. If necessary, staff members are given the opportunity to take courses to extend or update their knowledge and skills.

QANU's project managers may continue their career at a university or at the NVAO, while staff members of universities who are active in the area of quality assurance have the opportunity to work for QANU, either as an employee of QANU or in a secondment arrangement.

At the time when this self-assessment report was finalised, QANU's permanent staff included a director (1.0 fte), eight project managers (6.3 fte), a coordinator of operational matters (1.0 fte) and a secretariat (1.5 fte). In the next few years, the total size of the permanent staff time for project managers is expected to increase to approximately 10 fte. The number of freelance project managers who were involved in QANU's projects since 2010 was approximately 10.

#### **4.7. Position and status in the national context**

QANU has a strong position as a quality assurance agency in the Netherlands. It assesses the vast majority of the degree programmes offered by the research universities in the Netherlands.

QANU maintains regular contacts with the research universities in the Netherlands, and with other relevant institutions and organisations in the Netherlands, in particular the NVAO, the VSNU and the Ministry of Education. Since 2004, the board of QANU pays annual visits to the boards of most of the universities in the Netherlands to discuss QANU's past performance and any relevant future developments, either strategic or practical.

QANU has regular formal and informal contacts with the NVAO to discuss developments in the external quality assurance system, to provide comments on plans and proposals and to discuss general issues with respect to the assessment of degree programmes, such as issues related to the planning of assessments. Together with other quality assurance agencies, it participates in meetings organised by the NVAO to discuss developments in the system of external quality assurance, the use and interpretation of the assessment frameworks and other relevant issues. QANU mainly has informal contacts with the VSNU and the Ministry of Education. QANU's staff members often participate in workshops, seminars or other gatherings organised by NVAO, VSNU or the Ministry of Education.

QANU contributes to the discussions about the system of quality assurance in various ways. The board, the director and the project managers attend and contribute to meetings organised by, for instance, the Ministry of Education, the NVAO and the Inspectorate of Education. QANU's board produced a policy paper about the system of quality assurance that was distributed among the relevant stakeholders. The chair of QANU's board participated in an expert meeting about the development of the system of external quality assurance in September 2014 at the invitation of the House of Representatives. The director coordinated a workshop at a large conference organised by the Inspectorate of Education in May 2015. He also wrote a short article about the Minister's plans to revise the system of external quality assurance that was published in *HO management* in December 2015. In January 2016, QANU organised an expert meeting, attended by approximately 25 experts from the Ministry, the NVAO, the VSNU and various research universities, about the question whether degree programmes in the Netherlands are 'only' satisfactory. The overall assessment given most frequently by QANU's panels is *satisfactory*. Quite a lot of programmes feel that they are better than just satisfactory and Dutch higher education has a good reputation internationally. The experts agreed that it would be better to have a system in which panels assess programmes as either 'unsatisfactory' or 'satisfactory' instead of the current system that has four scales ('good' and 'excellent' in addition to 'unsatisfactory' and 'satisfactory'). They also agreed that the system makes it difficult for panels to adequately underpin 'good' or 'excellent'.

#### **4.8. International position**

QANU maintains irregular contacts with other quality assurance agencies in Europe, in particular with its Flemish counterpart, the Quality Assurance Unit of the VLUHR (the council of Flemish research universities and universities of applied sciences). QANU is listed on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). It is a member of ENQA (the European Network of

Quality Assurance Agencies) and of INQAAHE (International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education). Its staff members regularly participate in relevant conferences and workshops organised by ENQA, INQAAHE and other relevant organisations.

QANU aims at being active at a European and international level, at contributing to international developments and at conforming to European and international standards.<sup>14</sup> In recent years, QANU participated in a number of TEMPUS projects. It has occasionally submitted bids for assessments of degree programmes in other countries within the European Higher Education Area, but it has not been successful in systematically acquiring projects outside the Netherlands. The main reason is probably that QANU is that the daily rates QANU has to charge for its project managers are relatively high.

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<sup>14</sup> Chapter 9 of this self-assessment report provides more detailed information about QANU's international activities.

## **5. SWOT-analysis: an overview of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats**

### **5.1. Strengths**

- QANU is an independent organisation without any formal or financial links with universities or other institutions in the public domain. As a result, QANU is in a position to carry out all assessments which require the involvement of an independent quality assurance agency.
- QANU is a 'strong brand'. It has a large market share and its knowledge, expertise and experience are well-known and appreciated. It is well embedded in the area of higher education and external quality assurance. QANU has good working relations with representatives at all levels within universities and with other relevant organisations and institutions in the area.
- QANU's approach and working methods are in accordance with national and international standards with respect to quality and integrity. QANU is able to provide tailor-made solutions when necessary.
- QANU is familiar with the traditions and customs of the academic community at large and is able to adopt an approach which takes into account the preferences and expectations of degree programmes and research units.
- QANU's project managers are well qualified and equipped for their work. Their profile is closely related to QANU's core activities. In addition, QANU has a strong network of competent and experienced freelance project managers who provide additional capacity in peak periods.
- QANU is flexible and creative, it is able to provide tailor-made solutions to new questions or challenges at short notice.
- QANU produces well-written and readable reports that conform to the relevant standards and quality criteria. Research universities and other stakeholders (such as the panel members and the NVAO) appreciate the quality of the reports produced by QANU.
- QANU has a solid financial policy, it maintains a substantial financial reserve that can be used to preserve the continuity of the organisation in periods in which the number of assessments to be conducted is low.

### **5.2. Weaknesses**

- QANU is very strongly oriented towards universities. The reverse side of QANU's strong position is that QANU is not very dynamic or innovative outside the area of core activities.
- The efficiency of QANU's assessments is not optimal yet. There are differences in the approach and working methods of individual project managers. The tasks are not always carried out by the most appropriate staff members.
- In peak periods, QANU has to make additional efforts to maintain the quality of services and products. QANU attracts additional project managers for such periods, who need time to familiarise themselves with QANU's approach and working methods.
- QANU can offer its project managers relatively few opportunities for further development. Project managers who want to acquire a wider range of experience and expertise are likely to leave QANU after a few years.
- QANU's reports tend to focus too strongly on formal matters (for instance, the formulation of arguments supporting the panel's assessment) and on issues which can be taken for granted.
- The balance between chargeable time and overhead is somewhat uneven. QANU's relatively high daily rates have a negative impact on QANU's competitive power.
- QANU has limited possibilities to participate in projects which require an investment or a form of matching, because it has to pay such investments from its reserves.

### **5.3. Opportunities**

- QANU has opportunities to broaden its range of activities within its main area of activities, the sector of scientific education and research, without losing its independence.

- QANU can strengthen its position at the national level by actively participating in the discussions about the future development of the system of external quality assurance. It can contribute to that discussion by organising workshops or seminars on relevant issues in the discussion.
- QANU can strengthen its international position by attending more international meetings and conferences and by presenting the results and outcomes of its activities at such meetings. If QANU acquires a stronger international reputation, it may be able to extend its international activities as well.

#### **5.4. Threats**

- The discussions about the development of the system of external quality assurance can have impact on QANU's position and prospects. If universities get the opportunity to organise the assessments of their degree programmes themselves, they may decide to involve QANU to a lesser extent.
- QANU still faces peaks and valleys in its activities. Various stakeholders seem to be unaware that the peaks and valleys are a threat for the system of external quality assurance as a whole, not just for individual organisations such as QANU.
- QANU's dependence on a network of freelance project managers in peak periods is also a potential threat, because it is more difficult for QANU to monitor the quality of the work of these freelance project managers.
- Universities consider QANU's daily rates as relatively high and quite often look for alternatives. Especially in the case of research assessments, QANU faces competition from freelance project managers whose daily rates are considerably lower than QANU's.

## 6. QANU's higher education quality assurance activities

### 6.1. Assessments of degree programmes since 2010

The following table presents an overview of the assessments of degree programmes carried out by QANU since 2010:

Year	Assessments	Programmes	Reports	State of the art
2010	20	148		4
2011	15	125		1
2012	38	253	117	3
2013	28	287	95	7
2014	27	208	57	2
2015	16	164	36	3
Total	144	1185		20

The size and complexity of the assessments of degree programmes conducted by QANU varies strongly: from assessments of one single degree programme or a combination of a bachelor's and a master's programme to assessments in which (almost) all degree programmes in a specific discipline in the Netherlands were assessed.

The following list contains most of the larger assessments QANU conducted since 2010:

- 2010-2011: assessment of degree programmes in Law (10 site visits),
- 2012: assessments of degree programmes in Social Sciences (among others Psychology, Education Sciences and Cultural Anthropology),
- 2013: assessments of degree programmes in Humanities (among others Language and Literature, Arts and Culture, History and European and International Studies),
- 2013-2014: assessments of degree programmes in Mathematics, Physics and Astronomy and Informatics,
- 2014: assessment of teacher training programmes offered by eight universities,
- 2015: additional assessments of programmes in the humanities with a conditional accreditation.

Appendix 4 provides an overview of all the assessments of degree programmes carried out by QANU since 2010.

### 6.2. Assessments of research units since 2010

The following table presents an overview of the assessments of research units<sup>15</sup> since 2010:

Year	Assessments	Programmes	Reports
2010	11	70	
2011	7	16	
2012	9	224	
2013	10	88	16
2014	12	54	13
2015	4	11	11
Total	53	463	

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. note 10 on the use of the phrase 'research unit' in this report.

The size and complexity of QANU's research assessments varies considerably as well. Some assessments look at a single research institute or a limited number of research units, others at all the research carried out within a specific discipline by all universities in the Netherlands.

Appendix 5 provides an overview of the assessments of degree programmes carried out by QANU since 2010.

### **6.3. Other activities**

Between 2010 and 2015 QANU carried out various activities that fall outside the range of core activities, regular assessments of degree programmes and research units at universities in the Netherlands. These activities appeal to the knowledge and expertise of QANU's project managers in the area of internal and external quality assurance and assessments.

Since 2008, QANU offers workshops or training sessions for representatives of universities, faculties or degree programmes who are conducting a self-evaluation and writing a self-evaluation report in preparation of an assessment. QANU organises approximately 5 workshops per year at different universities, which are each attended by 10 to 25 staff members from various levels within the respective universities. Since the end of 2015, QANU also offers trainings for Boards of examiners. It looks as if there is considerable interest in these trainings: in the last six months, QANU gave five trainings for (groups of) boards of examiners. QANU also provided support for midterm reviews of degree programmes at a number of universities, including VU University Amsterdam, where QANU contributed to four midterm reviews in 2015 and 2016. In 2015, QANU provided support for a midterm review for the institutional quality assurance assessment of the Radboud University Nijmegen. QANU takes care to ensure that additional activities for research universities do not lead to issues related to independence or confidentiality.

From 2007 until 2013, QANU organised the assessment of the exam institutes for financial services, using a method of peer review which closely resembles the method used for the assessment of degree programmes offered by universities. QANU supported a panel of experts that assessed, on the basis of documents provided by the institute and information gathered during a site visit, to what extent the institute conformed to the formal criteria for recognition as an exam institute. The panel phrased recommendations to further improve the contents and quality of the exams. It also provided advice as to whether the recognition of the institute should be renewed. QANU prepared the assessments, supports the assessment panel and produces the reports. QANU's involvement came to an end as a result of a change in the way the exams were taken.

Since 2007, QANU participates in the assessment of training programmes for general practitioners. These assessments are part of a model for permanent quality assurance for these programmes. One of QANU's senior staff members chairs the audit teams that carry out the assessments.

In 2012, QANU contributed to the development of an assessment framework for the Dutch Order of Lawyers. The assessments based on this framework are not aimed at the accreditation of the training programme for lawyers, but at parties offering parts of this training programme. QANU also conducted two assessments of such parties.

More recently, QANU contributed to the development of an assessment framework for the Council for Primary Education. The assessments to be conducted on the basis of this framework look at the way boards of schools for primary education function.

## 7. QANU's quality assurance processes and their methodologies

### 7.1. General remarks

These general remarks apply to assessment of both degree programmes and research units.

1. QANU takes relevant formal frameworks as its starting points for all its assessments. In the case of degree programmes, it uses the frameworks developed by the NVAO, the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation<sup>16</sup>. In the case of research units, it uses the Standard Evaluation Protocol (SEP) developed by VSNU (the Dutch association of universities), KNAW (the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences) and NWO (the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research).<sup>17</sup>
2. QANU carries out assessments on the basis of a written commission from a university or a group of universities. It presents a transparent budget proposal for every assessment which contains a reliable indication of the costs to be incurred for the activities undertaken by QANU's project manager(s) contributing to the assessment and the members of the assessment panel.
3. QANU makes detailed arrangements with universities in advance about the programmes to be assessed and the working methods to be used. In most cases, QANU organises disciplinary assessments, including all programmes in a specific area or discipline in one assessment. These are obligatory for degree programmes since the most recent revision of the NVAO's frameworks. In disciplinary assessments, QANU mainly communicates with a representative of one university in the preparatory stage who acts on behalf of the group of universities involved in the assessment. It takes into account the wishes and preferences of degree programmes and research units in the preparation and organisation of the assessments whenever possible.
4. QANU has developed a Guideline for writing a critical reflection to support degree programmes preparing themselves for an assessment (cf. appendix 3). If desired, QANU organises information meetings or workshops for programmes that have to be assessed. In this way, QANU aims at enhancing the quality and the efficiency of the assessment processes.
5. QANU has always relied on peers to conduct assessments of education and research, because it is convinced that scientists who are experts in the discipline covered are pre-eminently able to phrase an assessment which is recognisable and meaningful for the leadership and staff contributing to a degree programme or research unit.
6. QANU verifies that panels meet the requirements with respect to independence and integrity. These requirements entail that panel members have no formal, financial or personal relations with the programmes to be assessed. In practice, this implies that panel members have not been employed by the university offering the programmes for the last five years, that they have not worked for or contributed to the programmes for the same period of time and that they do not have personal relations with staff or students involved in the programmes.
7. QANU makes detailed arrangements with members of assessment panels about their participation in the assessment and ensures that these arrangements are carried out as planned. It distributes relevant information, including the applicable formal framework, before the assessment. In the panel's first meeting, QANU presents information about the formal framework, the rules and procedures, the context in which the assessment will be conducted and the tasks to be carried out by the panel. This information enables the panel to perform its task adequately.
8. QANU assigns a project manager from QANU's staff or from its network of freelancers to an assessment panel who will act as process co-ordinator. This project manager will ensure that the assessment is carried out in accordance with the formal rules and guidelines and will monitor the consistency of the panel's assessments. The project manager will make practical arrangements with both the panel members and the contact persons of the programmes to be assessed and act as the panel's secretary.

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<sup>16</sup> NVAO, *Assessment frameworks for the higher education accreditation system of the Netherlands*, 19 December 2014.

<sup>17</sup> KNAW, VSNU, NWO, *Standard Evaluation Protocol 2015-2021. Protocol for Research Assessments in the Netherlands*. 21 March 2014.



9. The project manager writes a report containing the panels' findings and conclusions. QANU aims at producing reports which provide a clear and transparent underpinning of the panels' assessment. QANU ensures that the reports conform to the requirements used in the academic community and to the formal demands of organisations such as the NVAO which use the report as a starting point for an additional assessment procedure.

## **7.2. Assessments of degree programmes**

### ***Preparations of assessments of degree programmes***

1. QANU's assessments formally start with a quotation produced on the basis of the information received with respect to the degree programmes or research units which have to be assessed. This proposal serves as the basis for the commission QANU receives from a university (or a group of universities offering programmes in a specific discipline) to carry out the assessment. The proposal describes in detail what the commissioner may expect from QANU and what QANU expects from the commissioner.
2. The procedure for composing an assessment panel follows the requirements laid down in a NVAO document, which describes, among other things, the experience and expertise a panel should have.<sup>18</sup> Formally, an institution convenes a panel. As a rule, institutions delegate this task to QANU. On the basis of a list provided by the institution, QANU approaches the intended chairperson of the panel and the other candidate members on behalf of the institution, explains what their participation entails and provides information about practical and logistic details.
3. A panel is expected to have disciplinary expertise, expertise relating to the professional field, international expertise, educational or didactic expertise, expertise in testing and assessment and student expertise. It is possible that a panel member has two types of expertise (for instance, disciplinary expertise and educational or didactic expertise). If necessary, the panel is extended with members who have very specific disciplinary expertise, for instance expertise of a sub-discipline or a particular area of specialisation. In the case of disciplinary assessment which covers all programmes in a specific area, QANU aims at establishing a larger panel to enhance the flexibility and to enable panel members who have a limited availability to participate in the assessment.
4. The institution is required to submit the intended composition of the panel to the NVAO for formal approval before the site visit in order to establish the independence of the panel members. In practice, institutions delegate this part of the process to QANU as well. QANU collects the curricula vitae of the candidate members and asks them to complete and sign an independence and confidentiality form. QANU asks the board of the university to formally agree with the composition of the panel and for approval to submit it to the NVAO on behalf of the institution. QANU thus ensures that the programmes to be assessed know and approve the composition of the panel assessing them.
5. QANU distributes relevant information (including the assessment framework, other documents describing formal procedures and guidelines and forms to be used by the panel members) prior to the first panel meeting.
6. The programmes to be assessed produce a critical reflection, in which they describe their final qualifications, the contents and organisation of their curricula, various aspects of the learning environment and their system of testing and assessment, following the standards of the NVAO's assessment framework. The critical reflection provides information which shows that the programmes conform to the standards and thus fulfil the criteria for accreditation.
7. The NVAO assessment framework prescribes that degree programmes produce a domain-specific framework of reference for the assessment, which describes the content-related requirements that hold for programmes in a specific subject area. The assessment panel will use this domain-specific framework in addition to the NVAO's assessment framework, which focuses on issues which exceed the level of individual disciplines or subject areas.
8. The project manager who acts as secretary of the panel pays a preparatory visit to the institution offering the programmes to discuss and arrange practical issues related to the site visit, including the programme for the site visit and the composition of the groups of staff

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<sup>18</sup> NVAO, Requirements regarding panel composition within the framework of the accreditation system.

members and students who will be interviewed by the panel. The aim of this preparatory visit is also to inform the programmes to be assessed about the procedures and schedules which will be followed in the assessment process.

9. The panel holds a preparatory meeting in which it receives information about the context in which it will operate, about the frameworks and procedures which apply and about QANU's approach and working methods. In addition, the panel discusses the domain-specific framework of reference and various practical issues.

### ***The site visit***

1. The length of a site visit depends on the number of degree programmes which the panel has to assess. In general, site visits in which one to four programmes are assessed last one and a half to two days. If the number of programmes is more than four, panels need an additional day. In exceptional cases, it may even be necessary to reserve four days for a site visit.
2. QANU has developed standard programmes for site visits of one bachelor's and one master's programme that conform to the NVAO's assessment framework, which lists the delegations a panel will have to meet during its site visit. These programmes envisage interviews with the programme management, students, staff members, graduates, the Programme Committee and the Board of Examiners (which have a formal role with respect to the evaluation and improvement of the programmes and the quality of exams and assessments, respectively) and, finally, the board of the faculty which offers the programmes. In the first interview, the programme management is given the opportunity to briefly present relevant developments or changes since the finalisation of the critical reflection.
3. The panel uses the interviews to verify the information provided in the critical reflection when necessary and to gather additional information for those standards for which the critical reflection does not provide sufficient information. In addition, the panel also studies relevant documentation, for instance learning materials, examples of exams and assessments, and minutes of meetings of the Programme Committee and the Board of Examiners.
4. If a panel concludes that too many theses have unjustly been assessed as 'sufficient' or higher, it is expected to meet with the supervisors of these theses to discuss its criticism and to take into consideration the supervisors' response.
5. On the basis of all the information it has gathered, the panel assesses the standards of the NVAO's assessment framework. Finally, the panel decides whether the programmes fulfil the criteria which are a condition for accreditation.
6. At the end of the site visit, the chairperson of the panel presents a brief oral report of the panel's preliminary findings and conclusions.
7. In accordance with the principles of the NVAO's assessment framework, the panel assesses the standards as 'unsatisfactory', 'satisfactory', 'good' or 'excellent'. The final conclusion regarding a programme will always be 'unsatisfactory' if standard 1, 3 or 4 is judged 'unsatisfactory'. In case of an unsatisfactory score on standard 1, NVAO cannot grant an improvement period. The final conclusion regarding a programme can only be 'good' if at least two standards are judged 'good', one of these must be standard 4. The final conclusion regarding a programme can only be 'excellent' if at least two standards are judged 'excellent', one of these must be standard 4.
8. If an assessment panel assesses a degree programme as 'unsatisfactory', the institution offering the programme can apply for an improvement period. If the NVAO decides that the programme should be able to bring about the necessary improvements within a maximum of two years, the programme's accreditation is extended. The programme is assessed once more one to two years after its first assessment to ensure whether it has been able to bring about the necessary improvements. As a rule, QANU organises these additional assessments if it also carried out the original assessment and supports the panel that conducts them.

### ***The report***

1. The project manager who acts as secretary of the panel prepares a draft version of the assessment report on the basis of the panel's findings and conclusions. This draft report contains a description and an assessment of the four standards from the NVAO's assessment framework. The description is based on the information contained in the critical reflection and on the additional information gathered during the site visit. The assessment reveals how the

panel has evaluated the information it has at its disposal, whether it has identified strong or weak points and how it assesses each standard.

2. The project manager sends the draft report to the members of the panel, inviting them to comment and to add information, clarification or argumentation where necessary or appropriate. At the same time, the draft report is also assessed by a project manager not involved in the writing of the report, who focuses on the consistence and the quality of the argumentation of the assessments.
3. The project manager processes the comments and suggestions from the panel members and her or his colleague and thus produces the first official version of the report. This version is sent to the programme management, which has the opportunity to identify any factual errors in the report. The project manager sends the comments from the programme management to the panel, which decides whether and how these comments are incorporated in the report.
4. On the basis of panel's decision, the project manager processes the comments from the programme management and thus produces the final version of the assessment report. This version of the report is sent to the board of the university which offers the programmes.

### ***Finalising the assessment***

1. After the report of the panel on the assessed degree programmes has been finalised, QANU evaluates the assessment process. To that end, it invites both the members of the panel and the contact persons representing the degree programmes to send their comments, suggestions or critical remarks to QANU's director, who discusses them with the project manager or who uses them to reflect on the process or procedures when necessary.

### ***Appeal procedure***

1. QANU has designed a procedure for degree programmes that want to raise a formal objection against an assessment by an assessment panel:
  - any appeal has to be submitted by the board of the university within a period of six weeks after the final report containing the assessment has been sent to the university;
  - the appeal has to contain a clear and detailed formulation of the objections of the board of the university;
  - QANU's board investigates whether the appeal refers to a procedural error or a misunderstanding on the side of QANU. If that is the case, QANU will try to correct the error or clarify the misunderstanding;
  - if the appeal is not related to an error or a misunderstanding on the side of QANU, the board will in principle organise a hearing to give the representatives of the university the opportunity to explain its objection in detail;
  - the board of QANU decides whether an appeal is justified and leads to a revision of the panel's report;
  - if the university does not agree with the decision taken by the board of QANU, it has the opportunity to take the matter to court.

## **7.3. Assessments of research units**

### ***Preparations for assessments of research units***

1. QANU's research assessments also start with a quotation produced on the basis of the information received with respect to the research units which have to be assessed. This quotation serves as the basis for the assignment QANU receives from a university (or a group of universities offering programmes in a specific discipline) to carry out the assessment. It describes in detail what the commissioner may expect from QANU and what QANU expects from the commissioner.
2. According to the SEP, the board of a university is responsible for the composition of the assessment panel. Formally, it appoints the panel. As a rule, the institution (or the group of institutions) convenes the panel that will conduct the assessment. QANU can also convene the panel on behalf of the institution(s). The panel members are expected to be sufficiently

independent to conduct the assessment. In most cases, a panel consists of five to six members with an outstanding reputation and an international background.

3. One of the panel members (often the chairperson) is familiar with the national context in which the research units operate, both in a formal and in a content-related sense. The composition does not have to be approved by an external organisation or institution.
4. QANU distributes relevant information (including the SEP, other documents describing formal procedures and guidelines and forms to be used by the panel members) prior to the site visit and provides an introduction to the framework and the working methods of the panel in a preparatory meeting preceding the interviews with the representatives of the research units.
5. The programmes to be assessed produce a critical reflection that takes the Standard Evaluation Protocol as a starting point. They address the quality, the relevance and the viability of the research and also the PhD training programmes and integrity.
6. The board of the university specifies the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the assessment committee for each separate assessment. These Terms of Reference contain specific information about the research unit to be assessed and/or about elements that the assessment committee must consider. This information may be related to strategic questions or to a research unit's specific tasks. If the assessment covers a discipline, the assessment committee may be asked to make strategic recommendations for the entire discipline at national level.
7. The project manager who acts as secretary of the panel discusses the preparations and practical arrangements with representatives of the institution(s) participating in the assessment.
8. The panel holds a preparatory meeting in which it receives information about the context in which it will operate, about the frameworks and procedures which apply and about QANU's approach and working methods. In addition, the panel discusses the domain-specific framework of reference and various practical issues.

### ***The site visit***

1. The length of a site visit depends on the number of research units that have to be assessed. If an assessment covers a discipline, the site visit can last up to a week or sometimes be spread over two periods of one week. In such cases, the panel either travels from one university to the other or it receives representatives of the research units at a central location in the Netherlands.
2. QANU discusses the details of the programme of the site visit with representatives of the research units. These programmes envisage interviews with the director or management of the research unit, the heads of the research groups in the unit, staff members (tenured and non-tenured), PhD students, the boards responsible for the relevant graduate schools/research schools, delegates from the scientific advisory council (if the research unit has such a council), and delegates from the board of the institution (if necessary).
3. The panel uses the interviews to verify and to supplement the information provided in the critical reflection when necessary.
4. On the basis of all the information it has gathered, the panel assesses the criteria and the additional aspects mentioned in the SEP. The panel assesses the criteria 'quality', 'relevance to society' and 'viability' as 'unsatisfactory', 'good', 'very good' or 'excellent'. It does assess the PhD training programmes and the research integrity in a qualitative way. It does not give an overall assessment of the research unit as a whole.
5. At the end of the site visit, the chairperson of the panel presents a brief oral report of the panel's preliminary findings and conclusions.

### ***The report***

1. The project manager who acts as secretary of the panel prepares a draft version of the general section of the assessment report, describing the procedures followed, the members of the assessment committee and the research unit or units assessed. The project manager also writes the assessment of the PhD training programmes and the research integrity policy. Either the panel members or the project manager produce a draft version of the assessment of the research unit(s). The description is based on the information contained in the self-assessment

report and on the additional information gathered during the site visit. The panel provides recommendations for the near future.

2. The project manager sends the draft report to the members of the panel, inviting them to comment and to add information, clarification or argumentation where necessary or appropriate.
3. The project manager processes the comments and suggestions from the panel members and thus produces the first official version of the report. This version is sent to the research unit management, which has the opportunity to identify any factual errors in the report. The project manager sends the comments from the management to the panel, which decides whether and how these comments are incorporated in the report.
4. On the basis of panel's decision, the project manager processes the comments from the programme management and thus produces the final version of the assessment report. This version of the report is sent to the board of the university which hosts the programmes. The university is obliged to publish the report on its website. QANU publishes most reports on its own website as well.

### ***Finalising the assessment***

1. After the report of the panel on the assessed research units has been finalised, QANU evaluates the assessment process. To that end, it invites both the members of the panel and the contact persons representing the research units to send their comments, suggestions or critical remarks to QANU's director, who discusses them with the project manager or who uses them to reflect on the process or procedures when necessary.

### ***Appeal procedure***

1. QANU does not have a separate appeal procedure for assessments of research units.

## 8. QANU's internal quality assurance

QANU uses a variety of internal procedures for monitoring and improving the quality of the work undertaken and of the staff members doing the work.

- QANU organises internal meetings to discuss relevant developments in the system of external quality assurance both at a micro level and at a macro level. Some issues are discussed in the regular bi-weekly staff meetings. QANU also organises occasional meetings in which a relevant issue is discussed more in-depth. For example, QANU will discuss the application and elaboration of the NVAO's decision rules in detail in a meeting in April. QANU invites experienced freelance project managers for some of these meetings as well.
- QANU gives its project managers the opportunity to follow courses to further develop themselves. QANU sometimes organises a course or programme geared towards the needs of its project managers. In the autumn of 2015, QANU organised a training in educational sciences from the perspective of assessments of degree programmes. This training was also attended by the core of QANU's freelance project managers.
- QANU's director conducts a cycle of performance interviews with all staff members which focus on personal development in relation to past performance. The outcomes of these interviews can be that a staff member follows a course or training to further develop specific knowledge or skills.
- QANU has elaborated its selection procedure for new staff members. New staff members have at least two interviews before they are appointed, the first one with two staff members (in most cases two experienced project managers), the second one with the director. Potential project managers are asked to submit written work as evidence of their writing skills.
- New project managers are assigned a more senior staff member who acts as their coach and mentor. These new project managers initially attend a site visit as an observer, sometimes with a small task. During their first site visit, they are accompanied by a senior project manager who is able to solve any problems that may arise.
- The draft reports produced by QANU's project manager are assessed by a colleague who was not involved in the project on the basis of a checklist containing a number of relevant quality criteria. If possible, this assessment takes place before the draft report is sent to the programmes to identify any factual errors.
- Twice a year, QANU's board reads a sample of reports that have been finalised in the period prior to the board meeting, discusses its questions and observations and formulates suggestions for improvement. QANU's director makes a selection from the reports and regularly asks the board to reflect on specific questions or issues. In a recent meeting, the board discussed a series of reports describing the outcomes of additional assessments after an improvement period. The board also discussed a series of reports of research assessments.

### *Evaluations of assessments*

In the past, QANU used an electronic evaluation form provided by an external party to evaluate the assessments it had conducted. After a few years, QANU decided not to continue using this instrument. Quite often, the form was completed by one or two panel members or contact persons only. The reliability and the statistical relevance of the results of the evaluations were therefore very limited and these results did not allow for underpinned conclusions. QANU decided to use a more qualitative instrument for providing feedback instead of the electronic evaluation form.

As a rule, QANU evaluates an assessment after the reports of the assessment panel have been finalised and submitted to the respective universities. The project manager invites both the members of the assessment panel and the contact persons of the programmes assessed to provide comments, recommendations or criticisms relating to the assessment.

The information provided to QANU's director reveals that panel members are generally satisfied with the way the assessments are organised and carried out and with the support they receive from QANU. They consider their participation in the assessments as useful and valuable. Their

critical remarks refer to the size, complexity and duration of the process and the amount of time involved, the system of assessment and accreditation and the assessment framework used for the assessment of degree programmes. The amount of time and effort is especially extensive for panel members who participate in a disciplinary assessment, in which all degree programmes in a certain discipline offered by universities in the Netherlands are dealt with. The criticisms expressed by panel members are largely shared by the contact persons, who emphasise that the process as a whole, including the writing of the self-evaluation report, the site visit and the accreditation procedure, takes too much time and effort.

Unfortunately, the response to the invitation to the project manager's request to provide information to QANU's director is often limited. The advantage of this method is that the director has the opportunity to reply to the information he receives and ask for additional feedback or clarification if he wants to. Yet the current method is not perfect either. QANU will continue looking for evaluation methods that create a sufficient response and relevant information about the assessments QANU conducted.

In addition to the evaluations of individual assessments, QANU organises meetings with the chairs of the assessment panels once every three to four years. In these meetings, the chairs are asked to share their experiences and to comment on QANU's approach towards assessments of degree programmes and research units and on the quality of the support they received from QANU. They are also invited to propose suggestions for the improvement of the assessments. The most recent meeting with chairs of panels was held in October 2012. QANU's Board has decided to organise another meeting with chairs in the second half of 2016.

## 9. QANU's international activities

In recent years, QANU participated in a number of TEMPUS projects funded by the European Commission. QANU participated in the TEMPUS project PICQA (Promoting Internationalisation and Comparability of Quality Assurance in Higher Education), that was aimed at the improvement of the internal and external quality assurance in higher education in Armenia and Georgia. Since 2012, QANU was also active in the TEMPUS projects INARM (Informatics and Management: Bologna-Style Qualifications Frameworks, aimed at the improvement of higher education in Russia, Ukraine and Armenia by developing sectoral qualification frameworks for information sciences and management and by enhancing the quality, the consistency and the relevance of the qualifications) and QUADRIGA (Qualification Frameworks in Central Asia: Bologna-Based Principles and Regional Coordination, aimed at introducing qualification frameworks (and the philosophy behind them) in countries in Central-Asia and at improving the educational systems in these countries by further developing existing requirements on the basis of, among other things, the Tuning approach). Finally, QANU also participated in ENCHASE (Enhancing Albanian System Of Quality Assurance In Higher Education: Application Of The Process- and Outcome-Based Methodology, the aim of which was to strengthen the system of quality assurance in higher education in Albania by developing a general framework and a uniform system of quality assurance in Albania).

QANU co-operates on a regular basis with the University of Curaçao. QANU has supported various assessments of degree programmes and midterm reviews and provided training sessions for staff members preparing a critical reflection in preparation of an assessment or a midterm review.

QANU has occasionally submitted bids for assessments of degree programmes in other countries within the European Higher Education Area, but it has not been successful in acquiring projects outside the Netherlands, it did not carry out cross-border quality assurance activities yet. The main reason is probably that QANU is rather expensive, that the daily rates QANU charges for its project managers are relatively high.





## 10. Compliance with European Standards and Guidelines (Part 3)

In this chapter and in the next, QANU systematically describes to what extent the European Standards and Guidelines apply to the system of external quality assurance in the Netherlands in general and to QANU's position and activities within that system in particular. QANU has its own role and responsibility within that system. QANU is convinced that the system of external quality assurance as a whole complies with the European Standards and Guidelines and that its own activities comply with these standards and guidelines whenever that is possible as well.

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

**Standard:**

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.

QANU's core activity is to conduct assessments of degree programmes and research units offered by research universities in the Netherlands. The assessments of *degree programmes* are clearly within the scope of the European Standards and Guidelines. To some extent, assessments of research units can be considered to be within the scope of ESG as well: panels conducting research assessments also take into account the *training programmes for PhD candidates*.

QANU's mission explicitly refers to the assessments of degree programmes and research units. It states that "QANU contributes to the further improvement of the quality of scientific education and research in the Netherlands by organising and coordinating assessments by peers of scientific degree and research programmes on behalf of universities and other institutions and by conducting other activities in the area of quality assurance". The number of assessments carried out by QANU since 2010 is mentioned above, in section 4.8. These numbers show clearly that QANU's mission translates into its daily work.

The involvement of stakeholders in QANU's governance is not formalised. QANU is a foundation with a board that is ultimately responsible for the assessments QANU conducts. The members of the board know the sector of research universities well and take their knowledge and expertise into account when discussing developments in external quality assurance and their consequences for QANU's approach and working methods. The chairman of the board and the director visit the boards of most universities once a year to discuss both strategic and operational issues. They inform the board about the results of these visits, thereby ensuring that the comments from the boards of the universities, QANU's most important stakeholders, are integrated in the discussions of the board. QANU uses mostly informal contacts with other stakeholders in the same way.

*Evaluation.* QANU has a mission statement and an elaboration of its mission, but it is not a strongly mission-driven organisation. Given its position as a quality assurance agency within the system of external quality assurance in the Netherlands, it is bound by the formal frameworks that serve as the starting points for assessments of degree programmes and research units. QANU's policies and processes are very much in line with the frameworks mentioned.

QANU distinguishes itself from other quality assurance agencies in the Netherlands in a number of ways: it has always had a preference for a peer-review based approach, because it believes that scientific education and research should be assessed by scientists, it has always had a preference for disciplinary assessments covering all degree programmes or research units in a specific discipline, because it believes that such assessments provide a better and more reliable picture of the situation in a discipline, and it has always had a preference for an approach that is more strongly aimed at improvement than at accountability, because it believes that advice and

recommendations from peers enable degree programmes and research units to bring about improvement, while a strong focus on accountability may lead to too much attention for procedures and processes, a tendency to tick items off a list and a defensive approach. These preferences are not expressed explicitly in QANU's mission statement. QANU appreciates the fact that disciplinary assessments of degree programmes are now obligatory, but it feels that this obligation may disappear in the next revision of the system of external quality assurance.

QANU is not in a position to exert serious influence on decision-making processes relating to the design and development of the frameworks. QANU feels that it should be able to contribute more strongly to these processes, because it has gathered a lot of experience and expertise in the course of time and it is able to concretise ideas and suggestions and to explain why certain ideas are less likely to succeed and may have unwanted effects.

## 10.2. ESG Standard 3.2: Official status

### **Standard:**

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

QANU has an established legal basis: it is a foundation registered in the Netherlands that fulfils all legal requirements. Its statutes lay down its aims and objectives and the way it is governed.

The system of external quality assurance for *degree programmes* in the Netherlands is a two-tier system in which the NVAO's role is laid down in the Act on Higher Education and Scientific Research. QANU's role and contribution to the system of external quality assurance are not established by law, but QANU's formal recognition as a quality assurance agency is apparent: research universities commission QANU to conduct assessments of their degree programmes and research units, the NVAO takes QANU's reports as the basis for its accreditation decisions and publishes these reports on its website, and QANU is considered to be a serious and well-established partner in processes of external quality assurance by all relevant stakeholders.

In 2011, the NVAO introduced the requirement that secretaries of assessment panels have to follow a two-day training organised by the NVAO. QANU's project managers all followed this training. On its website, the NVAO refers to the responsibility of institutions of higher education for the assessment of their degree programmes. The NVAO points out that institutions can involve a quality assurance agency for these assessments and mentions the agencies active in the Netherlands, including QANU.<sup>19</sup>

When it comes to the assessment of research units (including *PhD training programmes*), the Standard Evaluation Protocol requires that assessments "should have the assistance of an independent secretary who is not associated with the research unit's wider institution and who is experienced in assessment processes within the context of scientific research in the Netherlands". QANU's project managers fit this description.

*Evaluation.* QANU has never properly understood why the formal position of quality assurance agencies has disappeared from the NVAO's frameworks after the revision of the system of external quality assurance that became effective on 1 January 2011. There does not seem to be any legitimate reason for this. Agencies such as QANU continue to play a crucial and indispensable role in the system of external quality assurance that can not be taken over by the NVAO or other organisations or individual secretaries. In practice, QANU's role and position has not changed at all since the revision of 2011.

While QANU is recognised as an agency that is able to conduct or support assessments of research units, it is increasingly difficult for QANU to actually acquire commissions for research assessments,

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. <https://nvaio.net/beoordelingsproceduresnederland/evaluatieorganisaties-nederland>. This page does not seem to be available in English.

because the market of research assessments is becoming more competitive and QANU's daily rates are relatively high. One of QANU's dilemmas is whether it should introduce (more) flexible daily rates to increase its share of research assessments.

### 10.3. ESG Standard 3.3: Independence

**Standard:**

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.

QANU has no formal, financial or personal connections with any of the institutions it conducts assignments for. QANU ensures that every assessment it organises is conducted by an independent panel supported by an independent project manager acting as secretary. Both panel members and the secretary sign a form before the assessment, thereby declaring that they are able to conduct the assessment independently because they have no formal, financial or personal connections with the institutions or the programmes to be assessed either.

QANU's procedures for establishing that both panel members and secretaries supporting a panel are independent sufficiently guarantee that the assessments it conducts fulfil the criteria with respect to independence and integrity. QANU's leading principle is that a panel of peers assesses a degree programme or a research unit and that QANU's project managers provide support in this process. The panels ultimately determine the form and contents of their reports. The assessments and conclusions drawn by panels are not negotiable.

*Evaluation.* QANU is fully aware of the fact that it is financially dependent on commissions from research universities for assessments of degree programmes and research units. To safeguard its independence, QANU ensures that its project managers have no role in establishing the assessments. QANU relies on peers and respects their assessments. If necessary, QANU's project managers play an intermediary role between institutions and panels. Until now, this potential tension has not lead to discussions, conflicts or other unpleasanties.

### 10.4. ESG Standard 3.4: Thematic analysis

**Standard:**

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

Over the years, QANU has completed a series of thematic analyses: some of QANU's panels assessing *degree programmes* have produced a co-called state of the art report, describing the state of affairs in a specific discipline from a substantial point of view. State of the art reports are only produced by panels that assess all programmes in a specific discipline. QANU's panels produce such a report at the request of the research universities participating in an assessment. Not every panel receives such a request. The deans of the faculties of arts and humanities, for instance, felt that the clusters of degree programmes assessed in 2012 and 2013 were too diverse to allow for a useful and coherent analysis of the clusters as a whole.

Some of the state of the art reports contain recommendations for the discipline as a whole. As a rule, state of the art reports are published on QANU's website.

QANU has not produced any thematic analyses based on assessments of research units (including *PhD training programmes*).

*Evaluation.* The quality of QANU's state of the art reports differs. Some assessments panels are better equipped to produce such a report than others. Some disciplines are more suited for an analysis that takes the discipline as a whole into consideration than others. QANU produced two state of the art reports on medical science, for instance, that were received positively and

considered to be relevant. It is quite understandable that the added value of state of the art reports for less homogeneous disciplines, such as the areas covered in the assessments in the humanities, is considerably less.

QANU has a lot of experience and expertise when it comes to assessments of both degree programmes and research units. Until now, it has not really tried to use this experience and expertise for analyses of specific aspects of assessments. In 2014, QANU produced a policy paper called *Towards a more effective and reliable accreditation system* (in Dutch: *Naar een efficiënter en betrouwbaarder accreditatiestelsel*) that relied heavily on QANU's experience with assessments of degree programmes. In 2015, QANU's director produced two articles (one on the changing role of the Board of Examiners in assessments of degree programmes and one on the Minister's plans for the further developments of the system of external quality assurance, both published in the Dutch journal *ho-management*) that were also based on QANU's experience and expertise. The main reason that QANU has not made greater use of its experience and expertise is perhaps that there are no clear reasons for producing thematic analyses. QANU normally produces a report when there is a commissioner who wants the report. It is obvious that there are opportunities for improvement here.

## 10.5. ESG Standard 3.5: Resources

### **Standard:**

Agencies should have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out their work.

QANU does not receive any form of structural or systematic funding from the Dutch government or other institutions or organisations. It is entirely dependent on the revenues it manages to create by acquiring commissions for assessments of *degree programmes or research units* or other activities. QANU's revenues thus vary from year to year, depending on the number of assignments it acquires (cf. 4.4 on QANU's financial position).

QANU's resources are adequate and proportional. QANU has the means to recruit new staff members when necessary. QANU is able to guarantee its continuity in periods in which the number of assessments is low as a result of its financial policy, according to which QANU has sufficient reserves to cover quiet periods.

*Evaluation.* Although QANU's financial basis is relatively solid, QANU would still prefer more continuity and less divergence in its annual revenues. QANU's biggest challenge is to find out whether such a situation, in which QANU would be less dependent on the assessments of degree programmes and research units, can be brought about. See also the considerations in section 4.5 of this report.

## 10.6. ESG Standard 3.6: Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

### **Standard:**

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

In accordance with its statutes, QANU produces annual reports in which it accounts for its activities, revenues and expenses. The annual reports are discussed and approved by QANU's board. QANU's annual financial statements are assessed by an external auditor before QANU's board approves them. Until now, the external auditors have always assessed QANU's financial statements and the quality of the administrative procedures as positive.

As described above (cf. chapter 8), QANU has introduced various procedures and measures to assess and improve the quality of its own processes and products. These procedures and processes apply to assessments of both *degree programmes* and *research units*. They include:

- regular discussions of existing procedures and regulations in the bi-weekly staff meetings and occasional staff meetings devoted to important issues (for example a revised framework or a new guideline from the NVAO);
- discussions of issues that arise during (preparations for) site visits or in the production of reports with colleagues or in the staff meetings. If necessary, such discussions may lead to revisions of existing procedures;
- assessments of draft reports by colleagues and consultations of colleagues when necessary (for example, in case of a deviation from a procedure);
- an evaluation of a selection of the assessment reports by the board of QANU;
- an evaluation of the assessments on the basis of information provided by panel members and representatives of the programmes which were assessed;
- a follow-up of the results and outcomes of these evaluations by QANU's director and the project manager when necessary.

*Evaluation.* QANU feels that the procedures for internal quality assurance are appropriate. QANU has been able to improve the overall quality of its reports in the course of time as a result of the assessments of draft reports by colleagues and of discussions in staff meetings about the requirements that may be imposed on reports. At the same time, QANU also notices that the demands made by degree programmes and research units are also increasing. QANU continues to pay serious attention to the quality of its reports and to look for ways to further improve that quality. QANU aims at producing reports that have an added value for the degree programmes and research units described, at providing not just the assessment of a panel of experts, but also advice and suggestions for further improvement. As a result of the pressure on assessments, it is difficult to produce reports that serve both functions of external quality assurance (improvement and accountability).

## 10.7. ESG Standard 3.7: Cyclical external review of agencies

### **Standard:**

Agencies should undergo an external review at least once every five years in order to demonstrate their compliance with the ESG.

QANU was assessed by an ENQA Review Panel in 2010 and produced this self-assessment report in preparation for another external review. The reason that more than five years have passed since the previous external review is that QANU's membership of ENQA was extended until the end of 2016, in accordance with an internal ENQA procedure. Since 2015, QANU's activities are also discussed in annual meetings with the NVAO.

*Evaluation.* Even though there is no formal requirement for QANU to undergo a periodic external review, QANU finds it important to demonstrate that its activities comply to international standards such as the ESG. QANU also finds it important to be the occasional subject of an external review itself.



## 11. Compliance with European Standards and Guidelines (Part 2)

In this chapter, QANU describes how and to what extent it meets the standards included in Part 2 of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG).

### 11.1. ESG Standard 2.1: Consideration of internal quality assurance

**Standard:**

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

The system of external quality assurance in the Netherlands is based on the principle that institutions of higher education themselves are responsible for the quality of their educational activities (cf. Act on Higher Education and Scientific Research, Article 1.18). It assumes that institutions in general and degree programmes and research units in particular have a system of internal quality assurance which periodically and systematically evaluates the results and outcomes of the educational processes. The system of external quality assurance assesses whether these systems function properly, whether they sufficiently ensure and enhance quality.

Institutions of higher education have the opportunity to apply for an institutional quality assurance assessment. These assessments focus on the systems of internal quality assurance for *degree programmes*. According to the NVAO's assessment framework, the objective of the institutional assessment is "to determine whether the board of an institution has implemented an effective quality assurance system, based on its vision of the quality of the education provided, which enables it to guarantee the quality of the programmes offered". One of the standards of the framework for institutional assessments asks whether the institution "pursues an adequate policy in order to realise its vision of the quality of its education", another one refers explicitly to the effectiveness of the "organisation and decision-making structure with regard to the quality of its programmes".

The idea underlying the introduction of the institutional assessment is that it would make both internal and external quality assurance more effective and less time-consuming. The outcomes of the revised system of external quality assurance show that the amount of work involved in assessments of degree programmes has not really decreased. Both the Minister and the House of Representatives consider the reduction of the administrative burden relating to assessments as an explicit objective for the future development of the system of quality assurance. The need to reduce the administrative burden is a leading principle in the discussions about the future design of the system of external quality assurance.

An institutional assessment does not investigate the internal quality assurance processes for research units or *PhD training programmes*. The description in the SEP shows that panels assessing research units are expected to assess the quality assurance of these training programmes<sup>20</sup>. As a rule, the panels do not pay much attention to the system of quality assurance, but focus on other relevant aspects of the programme, in particular on the institutional context, the supervision and guidance and the duration and success rates.

The standards in Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines are reflected in the system of external quality assurance in general in the following way:

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Standard Evaluation Protocol, p. 8: "The assessment committee considers the supervision and instruction of PhD candidates. The relevant subjects include the institutional context of the PhD programmes, the selection and admission procedures, the programme content and structure, supervision and the effectiveness of the programme plans and supervision plans, quality assurance, guidance of PhD candidates to the job market, duration, success rate, exit numbers, and career prospects."



### 1.1: Policy for quality assurance

**Standard:**

Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders.

The system of external quality assurance in the Netherlands is organised in such a way that it presupposes that institutions have a policy for internal quality assurance for the *degree programmes* they offer. This policy is assessed either in the institutional quality assurance assessment or, if an institution has not applied for such an assessment, in the extensive programme assessments. In the case of *PhD training programmes*, it is less likely that institutions as a whole have a policy for internal quality assurance. It is the responsibility of the research unit (or the faculty hosting the unit) to assess and evaluate the quality of the programmes. As a rule, the courses that PhD candidates can follow are evaluated. Since the training programmes for individual PhD candidates differ significantly, it is not easy to evaluate them from the perspective of the programme. Research units or faculties are more likely to have a policy for assessing them at a more abstract level (investigating, for instance, whether the more generic courses fulfil the needs of PhD candidates).

### 1.2: Design and approval of programmes

**Standard:**

Institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programmes. The programmes should be designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes. The qualification resulting from a programme should be clearly specified and communicated, and refer to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.

Both the Act on Higher Education and Scientific Research and the system of external quality assurance require that institutions have processes for the design and approval of *degree programmes*. The Act prescribes that every degree programme has an Education and Exam Regulation (in Dutch: *Onderwijs- en Examenregeling*, abbreviated as OER). This document contains, among other things, a description of the contents of the programme and of the tests and exams, the qualifications regarding knowledge and skills that a student should have acquired at the end of the programme (the intended learning outcomes), the study load of the programme as a whole and its individual components and the qualification a graduate of the programme acquires. The Act also specifies that the dean of the faculty formally establishes the Education and Exam Regulation after the Programme Committee has had the opportunity to discuss the regulation and provide advice to the dean, and after the Faculty Council has expressed its approval.

The Act does not contain any requirements for the design and approval of *PhD training programmes*. The procedures for designing and approving these programmes are laid down at the level of the faculty. These programmes do not result in a formal qualification, but are primarily instruments that enable a PhD candidate to complete a PhD thesis. The contents of a training programme are included in the Education and Guidance Plan that has to be signed both by the supervisor and the PhD candidate.

### 1.3: Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment

**Standard:**

Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.

The formal frameworks that apply to (the assessment of) *degree programmes* do not require explicitly that learning, teaching and assessment are student-centred. At the same time, the standards of the NVAO's assessment framework show clearly that institutions are expected to position students in the centre of their activities. Standard 2 of the framework for limited programme assessments, for instance, refers explicitly to "enabl[ing] the incoming students to achieve the intended learning outcomes". Standard 3 states explicitly that tests and assessments should be "transparent to the students". Various standards within the framework for extensive assessments also show that institutions are expected to provide student-centred learning, teaching and assessment. Assessment panels assess whether the intended learning outcomes are adequately reflected in the curriculum and in the tests and assessments.

Since *PhD training programmes* are strongly geared towards the needs of individual PhD candidates, they are likely to encourage PhD candidates to take an active role in the learning process from the very beginning. The components of individual PhD training programmes are not always assessed, the idea being that PhD candidates will not acquire a formal qualification, but need the knowledge and skills taught in the courses to be able to complete their PhD thesis and prepare themselves for the labour market afterwards.

#### **1.4: Student admission, progression, recognition and certification**

##### **Standard:**

Institutions should consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student "life cycle", e.g. student admission, progression, recognition and certification.

As mentioned above, *degree programmes* are legally required to have an Education and Exam Regulation that contains relevant regulations and procedures, such as admission criteria, admission procedures, regulations and procedures for progress, for providing information to students about their progress, about the conditions for graduation et cetera. This Education and Exam Regulation is one of the documents that an assessment panel receives and studies prior to its site visit. During the site visit, the panel discusses issues related to admission, progress and graduation with students, teachers, the Board of Examiners, the Programme Committee and the programme management. The panel does not assess these issues separately, but it includes any relevant observations and conclusions in its assessment of the programme.

In the case of *PhD training programmes*, both the supervisor and the PhD candidate sign the Education and Guidance Plan at the start of the period of employment of the PhD candidate. This plan lays down the arrangements made to enable the PhD candidate to conduct the research that will lead to a PhD thesis, including the component of the training programme, the amount of hours reserved for guidance and supervision and the other requirements and obligation of both the research unit and the supervisor and the PhD candidate (cf. Appendix .. for an example of an Education and Guidance Plan, the form used by VU University of Amsterdam).

#### **1.5: Teaching staff**

##### **Standard:**

Institutions should assure themselves of the competence of their teachers. They should apply fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of the staff.

All research universities in the Netherlands have adopted the so-called basic education qualification (in Dutch: *basiskwalificatie onderwijs*, abbreviated as BKO), a qualification that ensures that a staff member has acquired the competences and attitudes every university teacher should have. Obtaining this qualification is a necessary condition for a permanent position as a teacher, either in a 'regular' *degree programme* or a *PhD training programme*. Some universities have also introduced a senior qualification describing more advanced competences and attitudes. In some universities, this senior qualification is required for a position as programme director or other senior positions. The competences of the teachers are discussed in the annual assessment interviews between staff members and their superiors (mostly professors who head a department,

section or research group). Staff competences are dealt with in Standard 2 of the framework for limited assessment and Standard 6 of the framework for extensive assessments.

The processes applied by institutions for the recruitment and developments of their staff are assessed in the institutional quality assurance assessment or, if an institution did not apply for this assessment, in the extensive programme assessment. The second standard of the framework for the institutional assessment refers explicitly to policies for staff, the sixth standard of the framework for extensive programme assessments is about the size and qualifications of staff. The Standard Evaluation Protocol does not refer explicitly to the recruitment and development of staff members who teach courses in a PhD training programme.

#### **1.6: Learning resources and student support**

##### **Standard:**

Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided.

The Dutch system of higher education has no formal requirements related to learning resources and student support and it is not easy to define 'appropriate funding', but it is common practice that institutions ask students in course or programme evaluations whether they consider the resources and support available to them as adequate and accessible. It is also common practice that panels assessing *degree programmes* verify whether students encounter any problems related to learning resources or support. Assessment panels using the framework for limited assessments take the availability of learning resources and student support into consideration in their assessment of Standard 2. In the framework for extensive assessments, learning resources fall under Standard 3 or 7, while student support falls under Standard 8.

In the case of *PhD training programmes*, the arrangements for PhD candidates are laid down in the Education and Guidance Plan. This plan typically contains details not just about courses to be taken, but also about costs for these courses, including, for instance, travel and accommodation costs for participation in international summer schools or for attending relevant seminars, conferences or other meetings. Research units have budgets for funding these learning and teaching activities. Assessment panels tend to ask PhD candidates whether the means they have at their disposal are sufficient to attend the courses and other activities described in their Education and Guidance Plan.

#### **1.7: Information management**

##### **Standard:**

Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.

All institutions of higher education have experts who specialize in information management (and conduct institutional research, as it is commonly called in the Netherlands). These experts collect, process and use information relating to *degree programmes* from a variety of sources, for instance systems used for monitoring student progress and success rates, from evaluations of courses and programmes, from surveys among graduates, employers or other stakeholders et cetera. Students and teachers are involved in these processes in various ways: they provide information (for example by completing evaluation forms or surveys), they analyse information (for instance, the outcomes of evaluations are discussed in the meetings of the programme committee) and they use information (for instance, the programme committee may use the outcomes of evaluations to provide advice or to formulate proposals or measures for the programme management).

The results of the work in the area of information management largely serve as means to measure whether goals have been reached or whether improvement is necessary. Information management as such is not assessed in the Netherlands. It is, however, important when it comes to providing evidence supporting claims that a programme meets the standards. For instance, an assessment

panel looks at success rates of programmes in order to determine whether a programme manages to realize its aims and objectives.

In a similar way, research units also have information on progress, success rates and drop-out rates at their disposal for assessment panels who take these quantitative data into consideration when they assess the *PhD training programmes* a research unit is involved in.

### 1.8: Public information

#### Standard:

Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible.

It is important for institutions of higher education to provide information about *degree programmes* to students, prospective students and other stakeholders that is clear, accurate, objective, up-to-date and readily accessible. Institutions primarily use their websites for distributing information, but they have other means as well (printed materials, brochures or leaflets, information markets, 'open days' et cetera). The legal and formal frameworks relevant for institutions of higher education do not contain any explicit requirements for the provision of public information. The availability or quality of public information as such is not assessed in the Netherlands, but institutions consider it a necessary condition for their reputation and position to provide such information.

The provision of information about *PhD training programmes* differs slightly. Most PhD candidates enter such a programme after they have successfully applied for a vacant position within a research unit. The contents of their training programme will be determined on the basis of their research plan and their specific needs after they have been accepted as PhD candidate. Of course, the information about the possible courses to be taken may be expected to be clear, accurate and up-to-date.

### 1.9: On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes

#### Standard:

Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and respond to the needs of students and society. These reviews should lead to continuous improvement of the programme. Any action planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned.

Institutions of higher education in the Netherlands are expected to have a system of internal quality assurance. External assessments aim at establishing whether such a system monitors and reviews the quality of the degree programmes offered by an institution.

Panels that assess *degree programmes* on the basis of the framework for limited assessments do not assess the system as such, but they do discuss issues related to (outcomes of) evaluations of the contents of the curriculum, the changing needs of society, students' workload or the procedures for assessment from a substantial point of view. During its site visit, an assessment panel always talks to the programme committee, the committee that discusses course and programme evaluations and advises the programme management on the basis of the outcomes of these evaluations. The system of internal quality assurance is no longer taken into consideration in a programme assessment if the institution offering the programme has successfully passed the institutional assessment. Of course, this does not imply that the programmes of this institution are not monitored continually or reviewed on a regular basis. If the institution has successfully passed the institutional assessment, it is fair to assume that the institution's internal quality assurance ensures that the institution's degree programmes are monitored and reviewed systematically.

The framework for extensive programme assessments has a standard (Standard 9) that relates to monitoring and periodic reviews of programmes.

Panels assessing a research unit are expected to assess the quality assurance of the PhD training programmes, which implies that institutions are expected to monitor and review these programmes as well. Since the programmes are strongly geared towards the needs of individual PhD candidates and aim at enabling them to produce a PhD thesis, panels don't assess these programmes in a systematic way, but focus on the aspect of enabling.

#### 1.10: Cyclical external quality assurance

##### **Standard:**

Institutions should undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis.

Institutions of higher education can apply for an institutional quality assurance assessment. A positive institutional assessment is valid for six years. *Degree programmes* of institutions of higher education are assessed every six years. The system of external quality assurance for degree programmes in the Netherlands was designed to conform to the European Standards and Guidelines. The NVAO was assessed by an ENQA review panel in 2012 and was found to comply with the ESG. This provides evidence that institutions undergo external quality assurance in line with the European Standards and Guidelines on a cyclical basis.

*PhD training programmes* are assessed as part of the assessments of the research units they belong to. The framework for these assessments is the Standard Evaluation Protocol, which prescribes that research units are assessed every six years. This means that PhD training programmes undergo external quality assurance on a cyclical basis as well. It is not clear, however, whether the assessments are entirely in line with the ESG.

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This description shows that the standards in Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines are reflected in the system of external quality assurance for degree programmes. The standards don't seem to be completely reflected in the external quality assurance for PhD training programmes. This is probably due to the fact that PhD training programmes differ significantly from 'regular' degree programmes and that completing them is not an aim in itself, but a means to an end.

*Evaluation.* The question whether external assessments address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes is implicitly present in various standards in the NVAO's framework for institutional quality assurance assessments. The main issue to be assessed in an institutional assessment is whether an institution succeeds in realising its vision and the policies derived from this vision. This issue is clearly related to the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance. Strictly speaking, it can thus not be ignored that the external quality assurance addresses the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance. The problem as it is perceived by many institutions (especially research universities) is that it does much more than that: in addition to the institutional assessments, institutions are also obliged to demonstrate that their degree programmes fulfil the criteria for accreditation, even when it is already evident that the system of internal quality assurance is adequate and that an institution is in control of the processes and procedures related to quality assurance. As mentioned earlier, various research universities are in favour of abolishing accreditation at the level of degree programmes in case of a positive institutional assessment. The House of Representatives, on the other hand, wants to maintain programme accreditation. The result of the discussions about the further development of the system of external quality assurance seems to be that research universities are becoming reluctant to participate in a pilot for institutional accreditation as proposed by the Minister of Education (cf. section 3.2, page 18).

The framework for the assessment of research units, the Standard Evaluation Protocol, does not seem to address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance in a similar way. The criteria primarily refer to aspects of the quality of the research conducted and not to the quality processes and procedures applied within a research unit.

## 11.2. ESG Standard 2.2: Designing methodologies fit for purpose

### **Standard:**

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.

Since QANU's assessment by an ENQA review team in October 2010, the NVAO's assessment frameworks were revised twice, following amendments of the Act on Higher Education and Scientific Research. The most important revision is the introduction of the institutional quality assurance assessment. The main reasons for the introduction of the institutional quality assurance assessment were that the amount of work involved in the assessment of *degree programmes* was considered to be too high by various stakeholders and that the assessments themselves were felt to focus too strongly on procedures and processes instead of the contents of a programme. The philosophy underlying the revision was that the aspects of a programme that are not programme-specific (e.g., the system of quality assurance or the human resource policy, both of which are usually defined at the level of a faculty or a university as a whole) should be dealt with in an institutional quality assurance assessment. If these aspects are assessed positively, this assessment is assumed to be valid for all programmes offered by the institution. These aspects are therefore not taken into consideration in the assessment of specific programmes. As a result, these assessments can focus more strongly on the contents of a programme. It was also assumed that the amount of work involved in a programme assessment would be reduced considerably because the aspects mentioned would not be assessed any longer. This shows that the revision of the system of external quality assurance was meant to improve the fitness for purpose of the system.

The advisory group installed by the Minister in 2014 to provide advice about the further development of the system of external quality assessment contained representatives of the VSNU, the Association of universities of applied sciences, the student organisations, the NVAO, the Inspectorate of Education, the employers and the trade unions. It could be argued that only one group of stakeholders was not involved in the process of re-designing and improving the system: the quality assurance agencies.

The most recent version of the Standard Evaluation Protocol focuses more strongly on assessments at the level of the research unit as a whole. In the past, assessment panels primarily looked at research programmes. The current approach is meant to have a stronger fitness for purpose. Other revisions were also introduced to meet comments and criticisms on the previous version. For instance, research productivity is not a criterion to be assessed any longer, because a lot of stakeholders felt that the focus on productivity increasingly had unwanted effects. The current version of the SEP is the first one that explicitly requires the assessment of *PhD training programmes*.

*Evaluation.* It is clear that the external quality assurance for degree programmes takes the relevant regulations (as laid down in the Act on Higher Education and Scientific Research) as its starting point. It is equally clear that the external quality is designed with a view to ensuring its fitness for purpose. The parties that determine the design of the external quality assurance (i.e., the members of the House of Representatives), however, use a definition of "fitness for purpose" that differs significantly from that of the parties that undergo external quality assurance (i.e., institutions of higher education, in particular research universities). Research universities perceive the approach advocated by the House of Representatives as a lack of trust in their achievements and reputation.

The framework for assessments of research units, the Standard Evaluation Protocol, is jointly developed by three important stakeholders. It does not have to follow legal regulations, because the Act on Higher Education and Scientific Research does not contain any requirements for the assessment of research. There has never been any serious discussion about the fitness of the SEP.

### 11.3. ESG Standard 2.3: Implementing processes

**Standard:**

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.

The NVAO's assessment framework prescribes that *degree programmes* to be assessed produce a critical reflection that is based on a thorough self-evaluation. The assessment always involves a site-visit by a panel of peers. This panel produces a report in which it describes its observations, findings and conclusions. The follow-up of the assessment is that the NVAO takes a decision about the accreditation of a programme that is based on the conclusion of the panel of peers.

If an assessment panel assesses a degree programme as 'insufficient' and if the NVAO subsequently decides that the programme does not fulfil the conditions for re-accreditation, the institution offering the programme can apply for an improvement period. If the NVAO decides that the programme should be able to bring about the necessary improvements within a maximum of two years, the programme's current accreditation is extended. The programme is assessed once more one to two years after its original assessment in order to ensure whether it has been able to bring about the necessary improvements. As a rule, QANU organises these additional assessments if it also carried out the original assessment and supports the panel that conducts them.

The Standard Evaluation Protocol prescribes that research units produce a self-evaluation report that is based on a process of self-evaluation. This report describes the *PhD training programmes* the unit contributes to. The self-evaluation report forms the starting point for the assessment. The panel conducting the assessment visits the research units. Alternatively, in the case of larger assessments, representatives of the research units to be assessed may visit the assessment panel at a central location in the Netherlands for reasons of convenience. The assessment panel's findings and conclusions are laid down in a report that is made publicly available by the institution hosting the research unit. The SEP does not contain any rules or regulations for the follow-up of an assessment. According to the SEP, the board of an institution "determines its own position on the assessment outcomes. In its position document, it states what consequences it attaches to the assessment" (p. 6). "The institutions decide for themselves how to proceed in this regard." (p. 18) The position document is published together with the assessment report.

*Evaluation.* The external quality assurance processes for both degree programmes and research units are pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. There is discussion about the extent to which the processes for degree programmes are reliable and useful. Some degree programmes feel that their assessment does not reflect their quality adequately and refer, for instance, to other reviews according to which their quality is better or higher (the reverse has never occurred). Some degree programmes question the methodology used for assessing the achieved learning outcomes on the basis of a relatively small number of theses that are selected in a way that does not conform to scientific standards. Some degree programmes feel that the underpinning of a panel's assessment is not evenly balanced, not extensive enough or too selective. QANU's opinion is that the standards in the framework for limited programme assessments are so broad that they may have an effect on the reliability of the assessments, that the standard related to assessment is difficult to assess for a panel consisting of peers and that the principle of peer review is sometimes difficult to reconcile with assessments focusing on accountability. QANU is convinced that the fact that degree programmes do not always consider the assessments reports to be useful is related to the relatively strong (and increasing) focus on accountability in external quality assurance.

Some research units have phrased similar (but less strong) comments about the reliability and the usefulness of the processes laid down in the Standard Evaluation Protocol.

## 11.4. ESG Standard 2.4: Peer-review experts

**Standard:**

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

The procedure for composing a panel that assesses *degree programmes* follows the requirements laid down in the NVAO's *Requirements regarding panel composition within the framework of the accreditation system*. Every panel is expected to have external experts who have expertise in the field or discipline covered by the programme to be assessed. It is obligatory to have a student as one of the panel members.

The Standard Evaluation Protocol contains conditions for the composition of a panel that assesses research units and the *PhD training programmes* they are involved in. A panel "should be familiar with recent trends and developments in the relevant research fields and be capable of assessing the research in its current international context" (p. 11). It should "have a strategic understanding of the relevant research field" (p. 12). The conditions reveal that research assessments can only be conducted by peer-review experts. They do not require the presence of a student member (or a PhD candidate member) or the presence of a member with didactic or educational expertise.

*Evaluation.* There can be no doubt that external assessments of both degree programmes and research units are carried out by panels of external experts or peers. The question may arise whether these experts have the right experience or expertise. The fact that institutions have the responsibility to compose assessment panels does not guarantee that there are no discussions about the quality of the panels afterwards.

The composition of an assessment panel is especially important, but also difficult in the case of disciplinary assessments of degree programmes. For practical reasons, it is unavoidable that the composition differs slightly for the various site visits. This makes it more difficult to ensure the consistency and the reliability of the panel's assessments of the degree programmes offered by the institutions participating in the assessment. QANU considers it as one of its tasks to provide additional support aimed at strengthening the consistency of the assessment.

## 11.5. ESG Standard 2.5: Criteria for outcomes

**Standard:**

Any outcomes or judgements made as the 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 underlying the decisions taken by the NVAO about the reaccreditation of *degree programmes* are elaborated in the NVAO's assessment frameworks. QANU's assessment panels closely follow these criteria as well. They assess whether a programme fulfils the NVAO's criteria for accreditation, but they do not take a decision themselves. The NVAO takes the report produced by the panel as a starting point of its own assessment, verifying whether the panel has convincingly argued that a programme fulfils the criteria for accreditation and whether it has carried out the assessment in accordance with the NVAO's guidelines (which relate, among other things, to the necessary expertise a panel should have at its disposal and to the independence of panel members). As a rule, the NVAO follows the assessments of the panels of peers. Occasionally, the NVAO asks a panel for additional clarification.

The Standard Evaluation Protocol defines the criteria for the assessment of research units and the categories or scores that a panel can assign to these criteria. The assessment of a *PhD training programme* is qualitative and not expressed in a category. The SEP does not contain further instructions or specifications for the assessment of a PhD training programme. The outcomes of an



assessment of a research unit do not have formal consequences. If a panel is critical about a PhD training programme, it is up to the board of an institution (or a faculty or the research unit) to decide whether this criticism should be translated into measures for improvement.

*Evaluation.* There can be no doubt that the outcomes of assessments of degree programmes and research units are based on explicit and published criteria. This, however, does not mean that these outcomes are always accepted without discussion. As pointed out earlier, the consistency and reliability of the application of the assessment criteria is sometimes questioned by degree programmes who feel that the assessment is not entirely fair. QANU aims at producing reports that do not lead to lengthy discussions about the outcomes or judgements made, but can not always prevent such discussions.

## 11.6. ESG Standard 2.6: Reporting

### **Standard:**

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.

In the Dutch system of external quality assurance for *degree programmes*, results and outcomes of assessments of degree programmes are always made public. The NVAO is obliged to publish both its decisions about the accreditation of degree programmes and the reports produced by quality assurance agencies such as QANU that serve as the basis for these decisions on its website. The NVAO's website provides a link to a searchable database that contains links to the decision and the underlying reports. QANU does not publish reports on degree programmes, because the reports are still confidential when they are finalised and because the reports are published by the NVAO when a decision about reaccreditation is taken.

Universities are obliged to publish reports about the assessments of their research units on their website. These reports contain an assessment of the *PhD training programmes* linked to a research unit. The websites are supposed to have a page that contains links to all recent reports. For the sake of convenience (especially in the case of assessments covering the research of several or all universities in the Netherlands), QANU publishes the reports of research assessments on its website as well.

*Evaluation.* The reports resulting from assessments of degree programmes and research units are always made publicly available. QANU never takes formal decisions based on a report. QANU does not publish the reports on degree programmes on its website, because the procedure that is expected to lead to re-accreditation of a programme has not been completed when QANU finalises a report and it would be premature to publish the report. QANU does not publish reports after the NVAO has taken a decision about the re-accreditation of a programme, because the NVAO published the report and publication on QANU's website without the NVAO's decision does not seem to have any added value.

## 11.7. ESG Standard 2.7: Complaints and appeals

### **Standard:**

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

QANU has a procedure for *degree programmes* that want to raise a formal objection against an assessment by a QANU panel:

- an appeal has to be submitted by the board of the university to the director of QANU within a period of six weeks after the final report containing the assessment has been sent to the university;

- the appeal has to contain a clear and detailed formulation of the objections of the board of the university against the assessment;
- QANU's board investigates whether the appeal refers to a procedural error or a misunderstanding on the side of QANU. If that is the case, QANU will try to correct the error or clarify the misunderstanding;
- if the appeal is not related to an error or a misunderstanding on the side of QANU, the board will in principle organise a hearing to give the representatives of the university the opportunity to explain its objection in detail;
- the board of QANU decides whether an appeal is justified and whether it leads to a revision of the panel's report;
- if the university does not agree with the decision taken by the board of QANU, it has the opportunity to take the matter to court.

Until now, this procedure has not been used: QANU has never received any formal objections against the assessments of the panels it has supported. This is probably partly due to the fact that QANU is not entitled to take formal decisions about the reaccreditation of degree programmes. In addition, the fact that institutions themselves are responsible for convening an assessment panel and that they approve the composition of the panel in advance of the actual assessment is probably also relevant.

QANU does not have a procedure for research units that want to raise a formal objection and has never considered introducing one. The reason for this is that universities are the 'owners' of the assessments of research units (and QANU only plays a supporting role) and that the assessments do not lead directly to any formal decisions about the funding or the continuation of these programmes.

*Evaluation.* Of course, QANU is very glad that it has not yet received any serious complaints or objections that made it necessary to apply the procedure for complaints and appeals.



## 12. Information and opinions of stakeholders

QANU's main stakeholders can be grouped into the following categories:

- research universities and their boards, staff members and students,
- institutions and organisations who are active in or contribute to the system of external quality assurance in the Netherlands, such as the NVAO (the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation), the Ministry of Education, the VSNU (the association of universities in the Netherlands), other quality assurance agencies, the LSVB (the national student union), the ISO (the Dutch national students' association),
- the (former) members of assessment panels supported by QANU.

QANU's chair and director visit the boards of most of the universities once a year to discuss both strategic and operational matters. In these meetings, QANU asks explicitly for feedback on recent assessments of degree programmes or research units of that university. In some cases, the feedback concerns specific projects (the quality of a report, the composition of an assessment panel). In other cases, the feedback is more general (the way QANU selects theses to be read by a panel, QANU's daily rates). The chair and director also raise issues related to the development of the system of external quality assurance.

All universities appreciate the work QANU carries out, look at QANU as an important and reliable partner and acknowledge QANU's expertise, both at a strategic level, in the discussions about the design and development of the system of external quality assurance, and at a practical level, as a quality assurance agency conducting assessments of degree programmes and research units in accordance with the relevant assessment frameworks. Of course, the boards also make critical remarks, for instance about QANU's daily rates (which are perceived to be relatively high), about the time it takes to finalise reports (which is sometimes perceived to be too long), about the quality of reports (which is sometimes considered to be too weak) or about the quality of individual project managers acting as secretary of a panel (who may be considered to lack sufficient experience).

QANU maintains good relations with the policy advisors at the central university levels who coordinate the activities related to external quality assurance in their institutions. They also participate in the annual meetings between their boards and the chair and director of QANU. In most cases, they prepare their board members for these meetings and feed them information about the progress and outcomes of assessments. QANU's director often discusses strategic issues with them as well and sometimes provides advice about issues related to assessments. In general, these policy advisors are positive about the way QANU conducts assessments, even though they can be critical as well.

QANU has frequent and intensive contacts with staff members and policy advisors at the faculty level who act as contact persons at times when degree programmes are assessed. QANU invites these members to share their experience and to give recommendations or suggestions for improvement after an assessment. QANU has little direct contact with students.

QANU has frequent contacts with the NVAO, some of them formalised, for example the annual bilateral meetings that the NVAO initiated and the regular meetings of NVAO and the quality assurance agencies operating in the Netherlands. The bilateral meetings took place for the first time in 2015, but the NVAO has already decided to continue them. In these meetings, the NVAO discusses the agency's performance on the basis of a structured list of topics. In the meeting in August 2015, the NVAO expressed its satisfaction about the quality of QANU's work and in particular about the quality of QANU's reports. In addition, QANU has contacts with the NVAO concerning the outcomes of assessments or the use or interpretation of procedures or guidelines. For instance, a policy advisor at the NVAO may contact one of QANU's project managers with questions about a report produced by QANU. The NVAO never contacts panel members directly, it always approaches the secretary of the panel if it has remarks or questions about a report.

QANU has less frequent and mostly informal contacts with the Ministry of Education and with the VSNU. QANU was invited by the Ministry a few times in the past five years to share its experience as a quality assurance agency and to discuss ideas and scenarios for the development of the system of external quality assurance. QANU has discussed various policy issues with the VSNU, such as the revision of the assessment schedule.

QANU's board has decided to strengthen the relation with student organisations. The board recently decided to invite the student organisations to discuss relevant issues related to assessments and accreditation in one of the board's meetings.

QANU has frequent contacts with members of assessment panels during the assessments. After an assessment has been finalised, QANU invites these members to provide feedback on QANU's performance and to give recommendations or suggestions for improvement. Every three to four years, QANU invites chairs of panels for a meeting and invites them to share their experiences and to provide suggestions that will enable QANU to improve its working methods. In general, panel members highly appreciate the work done by QANU's project managers who act as secretaries of panels. In their opinion, project managers are professional, knowledgeable and reliable and they produce good reports that adequately reflect the panel's findings and conclusions.

QANU does not collect the opinions of stakeholders in a systematic way. QANU receives important and useful information in the annual meetings with the boards of universities and in informal contacts with the policy advisors at the central university levels. This information relates both to more general or strategic issues and to more operational ones.

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

### 13.1. Main findings from the previous review

In October 2010, QANU was assessed by a panel chaired by Professor Jürgen Kohler (Ernst-Moritz-Arndt-Universität Greifswald, DE). This panel assessed QANU as *fully compliant* on most of the criteria laid down in the ENQA Membership Provisions. It observed that QANU operates in a formal and legal framework that makes it difficult to fully comply with all criteria. As the panel stated in its final report, “in those cases where the panel passes a judgement of “sufficient compliance” responsibility can only in part be attributed to QANU since QANU is subjected to a number of limiting factors inherent to the Dutch system of task sharing in matters of external quality assurance”.

The panel concluded that QANU was not fully compliant with ENQA’s Membership Provisions on the following criteria:

- C1a 2.1 & 2.4 Fit for Purpose (assessed as *substantially compliant*)
- C1b Activities (assessed as *substantially compliant*)
- C4 Mission statement (assessed as *partially compliant*)
- C5 Independence (assessed as *substantially compliant*)
- C6 External QA (assessed as *substantially compliant*)
- C7 Accountability (assessed as *substantially compliant*)

The panel concluded that QANU sufficiently complied with ENQA’s Membership Provisions to justify full membership of ENQA.

### 13.2. Measures taken and improvements made on the basis of the recommendations of the ENQA panel since 2010

This section describes how QANU has responded to the recommendations made by the ENQA panel that assessed QANU in October 2010.

Panel recommendation: *QANU should examine the fitness for purpose of its nomination and selection process of Committee Members to ensure the criteria for nomination and selection are independent, transparent and consistently applied, particularly in relation to the role of the Chair.*

- Since 2010, the procedure for selecting and nominating members of assessment panels has changed as a result of the introduction of revised assessment frameworks in 2011 and 2015. NVAO’s current *Assessment frameworks for the higher education accreditation system of the Netherlands* (19 December 2014) describe the procedure to be applied as follows:

“Assessment panels assessing existing programmes in the context of a limited or extensive programme assessment are convened by the institutions that together constitute an assessment group. The institutions appoint a secretary and subsequently present the panel to NVAO for approval. To that end the institutions provide data on the expertise and independence of the panel members and the secretary, in a manner stipulated by NVAO. Institutions may also commission an external quality assessment agency to convene a panel for the assessment of existing programmes. In such cases the panel must also be presented to NVAO for approval. External assessment agencies presenting a panel for approval must be authorised in writing by the institution(s) concerned. The institution convenes the panel, appoints a secretary and subsequently presents the panel to NVAO for approval. To that end the institution provides data on the expertise and independence of the panel members and the secretary, in a manner stipulated by NVAO. The institution may also commission an external quality assessment agency to convene a panel; in such cases the panel must also be presented to NVAO for approval.” (p. 57-58).

This description reveals that institutions of higher education are responsible for the composition of a panel, not quality assurance agencies such as QANU. Alternatively, quality assurance agencies can convene a panel on behalf of the institutions that together constitute an assessment group. The NVAO has to approve the composition of a panel.

Chapter 13 of the NVAO's *Assessment frameworks for the higher education accreditation system of the Netherlands* lays down rules for the expertise that has to be available within the panel as a whole and, even more importantly, rules relating to the required independence of panel members. The institutions that constitute an assessment group (or a quality assurance agency acting on behalf of these institutions) provide information about the specific expertise of individual panel members (including curricula vitae) to the NVAO in order to obtain the NVAO's approval for the composition of the panel. Panel members are required to sign a form (a declaration) stating that they are in a position to conduct an independent assessment, that they have had no formal, personal or financial relations to the institution(s) they will visit for the last five years. The NVAO approves the composition of a panel after it has ascertained that the panel as a whole has the necessary expertise and that the individual panel members are sufficiently independent of the institutions that participate in the assessment.

Although QANU's formal role in the composition of assessment panel has changed since 2010, it is still very much involved in the process of approaching and making practical arrangements with panel members prior to the site visit(s). In practice, most institutions ask QANU to convene a panel on their behalf on the basis of a list of potential panel members provided by the programme(s) to be assessed. QANU invites the potential panel members to participate in the assessment of the programmes within an assessment group, collects and checks the necessary information provided by panel members who are willing to join the panel, and verifies whether the NVAO's requirements are fulfilled. QANU submits the necessary information to the NVAO for formal approval on behalf of the institution(s) involved. In this way, QANU promotes and contributes to the consistent application of the requirements. In spite of this involvement, QANU is currently not in a position to directly influence the process of nominating and selecting panel members.

One of the consequences of the revision of the procedure for selecting and nominating panel members is that the role of the chair in the initial phase of the assessment has changed. In principle, an institution provides a list of potential panel members including a potential chair. The chair does not actively contribute to the identification and selection of potential panel members any longer.

Since the most recent revision, the NVAO's assessment framework requires that the chairperson is trained by NVAO. The NVAO decided to involve the quality assurance agencies in the preparations of a training for chairs and to allow them to provide this training themselves on the basis of a profile of chairs, which describes, among other things, the knowledge and competences a chair should have. This profile has been finalised recently. QANU has developed a procedure for preparing chairs for their task that is in line with the NVAO's procedures and incorporates the knowledge and competences described in the NVAO's profile.

To conclude, QANU has been unable to formally implement the panel's recommendation because of the revisions of the accreditation system, but QANU does promote and contribute to the consistent application of the criteria for selection and nomination of panel members. QANU considers the criteria as such, as laid down in the NVAO's *Assessment frameworks for the higher education accreditation system of the Netherlands*, as adequate and transparent.

Panel recommendation: *QANU should provide a core 'baseline' set of briefing/training documents to supplement the information supplied at Installation Meetings.*

- In the course of time, QANU has developed a set of core documents that are distributed among panel members prior to or at the kick-off meeting of the panel. These documents are selected to properly prepare a panel for the assessment to be conducted. This set of documents is

revised, updated and extended on a regular basis, following the outcomes of evaluations undertaken by QANU or of discussions among QANU's board or staff, revisions in the accreditation system, new requirements imposed by the NVAO, or other relevant developments. Their aim is not limited to briefing or training purposes. Since QANU's assessments differ significantly, the set of documents provided differs as well: QANU aims at providing custom-made information to panel members. This core set of documents includes:

- the relevant assessment framework (in case of reviews of degree programmes: the NVAO's *Assessment frameworks for the higher education accreditation system of the Netherlands*);
- a document containing the slides presented at the kick-off meeting, dealing with relevant formal aspects of the assessment framework, the task of the panel, the site visit and the procedure to be followed after the site visit;
- the report of the previous assessment of the programme to be assessed (when available);
- the programme(s) of the site visit(s);
- a list of issues to be addressed in the various interviews, in the form of questions that can be raised by the panel;
- a checklist to be used for the assessment of the standards of the assessment framework.

During the kick-off meeting, the panel discusses its working methods on the basis of these documents. The kick-off meeting explicitly aims at preparing panel members for their task, but it also has more practical aims. Until now, QANU has not provided any courses or training for its panel members (although it now provides a more thorough preparation for chairs, see above). As a result, QANU does not have a separate set of documents exclusively aimed at briefing or training panel members.

To conclude, QANU provides a core set of documents to panel members that enable them to prepare themselves for their task adequately. QANU uses the kick-off meetings to explicitly inform and instruct panel members. The documents provided to panel members are updated regularly. Since a few months, QANU also uses a document aimed more specifically at preparing panel chairs for their task.

Panel recommendation: *QANU should extend its criteria for the nomination and selection of degree programmed assessment committees to include an international member.*

- As described above, the procedure for the nomination and selection of panel members was revised in 2010. Since 2011, QANU does not nominate and select panel members itself, but works on the basis of a list provided by the programmes constituting an assessment group. The composition of a panel has to fulfil the NVAO's requirements, one of which is that a panel has "international expertise". The NVAO's *Requirements regarding panel composition* elaborate the requirements set for the composition of assessment panels. In these guidelines "international expertise" is defined as "[the ability] of drawing substantive comparisons with related programmes abroad whose orientation and level are similar and, insofar as applicable, (...) insight into the requirements set by the international professional practice for graduates." Strictly speaking, this requirement does not prescribe the inclusion of an international member. It is also possible to nominate a Dutch panel member who has substantial experience in international co-operation. In practice, however, the panel member who has international expertise is an international member, someone from a university outside the Netherlands. Since quite a lot of programmes use Dutch as the working language for the assessment (and have most of their materials available in Dutch only), international members are quite often either Flemish experts or Dutch experts who moved to a university outside the Netherlands.

At the moment, QANU is not in a position to extend the criteria for the nomination and selection of panel members and to enforce the nomination and selection of international members.

To conclude, QANU has been unable to formally implement the panel's recommendation because of the revisions of the assessment frameworks.



Panel recommendation: *QANU is asked to provide transparent written guidance to institutions on the recruitment and selection of students that engage in all aspects of the assessment process. It might also look to consider expanding its own Board to include a student representative member.*

- Students contribute to an assessment in various ways: as members of assessment panels and as representatives of the programme(s) to be assessed who provide valuable information to the assessment panel. The student members of assessment panels are selected by the programme(s) to be assessed, in line with the requirements laid down in the NVAO's assessment framework. Of course, the condition of independence applies to student members as well: students are not allowed to participate in assessments of programmes offered by their own institution. QANU is not in a position to recruit and select student members of panels or to define or revise the criteria for their recruitment and selection and therefore does not provide written guidance on this issue in addition to NVAO's *Requirements regarding panel composition*. When necessary, QANU refers to this document. QANU advises programmes to recruit students who are familiar both with the discipline covered by the programme(s) to be assessed and with the organisation of scientific education. In practice, most students who participate in an assessment have experience as a member of a Faculty Board, a Programme Committee or another body that has a formal role in the process of developing, establishing or evaluating the curricula of a degree programme.

According to the NVAO's assessment framework, a panel decides which students and staff members it wants to talk to during its site visit. Panels want to have the opportunity to talk to students from the various years of the curricula and from the various specialisations a programme offers. The student delegation should be representative of the programme as a whole. QANU discusses the panel's preference with representatives of the programme(s) to be assessed in a preparatory meeting. In most cases, QANU asks the programme(s) to conduct the actual recruitment and selection, taking into account the panel's preference and the need to have a representative student delegation. Since programmes differ substantially when it comes to the number of students enrolled, the number of specialisations offered and even (when it comes to master's programmes) the length of the curricula, QANU does not use written guidance, but it discusses the recruitment and selection explicitly in the preparatory visit on the basis of the NVAO's assessment framework and the panel's preferences.

QANU's Board discussed the report of the ENQA panel and paid special attention to the recommendations phrased by the panel. It decided not to implement the recommendation to include a student representative as a member of the Board. It did, however, decide to strengthen the relations with student organisations. The chair of the board and the director had a meeting with the chair of one of the student organisations in the Fall of 2015. In December 2015, QANU's board decided to invite the most important student organisations to discuss relevant issues with the board once a year.

To conclude, QANU has not provided written guidance to institutions about the selection and recruitment of students, firstly because it is not responsible for selecting and recruiting student members of assessment panels, and secondly because it makes custom-made arrangements, based on the panel's preference and the complexity of the site visit, with programmes that are to be assessed. Finally, QANU's board decided not to adopt the suggestion to include a student representative among its members, but it decided to strengthen the relations with student organisations.

Panel recommendation: *QANU should provide explicit written guidance on the need to triangulate evidence where inconsistencies arise as part of the training/briefing documentation provided to assessment committee members*

- Especially in the past years, QANU has paid quite a lot of attention to improving the coherence and consistency of panels' assessments and to prevent inconsistencies in the assessments. The instruction of panels focuses more strongly on the decision rules provided by the NVAO and on the interpretation of the scores the panel can assign for the various standards. There are various reasons for strengthening the attention for coherence and consistency. Firstly, QANU

felt that this was an area where further improvement was necessary and possible, as noted by the ENQA panel as well. Secondly, the revision of the assessment framework (with only three broad standards since 2011 and four broad standards since 2015) made it necessary to brief panels more extensively on how they are expected to come to their conclusions. In addition, this increased attention for coherence and consistency also results from discussions with representatives of programmes who felt that the assessments they had received could not always be derived clearly or transparently from the panel's considerations as provided in the assessment report.

When it comes to collecting evidence and making it available to panels, QANU follows the requirements laid down in the NVAO's assessment framework regarding the obligatory appendices to critical reflections and regarding the documents that have to be available for the panel during its site visit. In addition, QANU has taken several measures to strengthen the consistency of the panels' assessments. For example, QANU uses standard checklists to be completed by panel members for their assessment of the various standards that also refer to relevant issues falling under the (rather broad) standards. QANU developed lists of questions and issues that can be raised in the various interviews conducted by the panel (although QANU prefers it when panel members formulate their own questions on the basis of a thorough analysis of the critical reflection and the accompanying documentation). In addition, QANU introduced the procedure that the project manager who acts as coordinator of an assessment group is present during the last panel meeting of a site visit to enhance the consistency in the panel's underpinning of its assessments when a panel is supported by several secretaries. In this way, QANU ensures that the evidence available is used in a structured and systematic way in the process that leads to the panel's assessment.

In QANU's view, the changes in the assessment frameworks that were introduced in 2011 and 2014 have a number of (probably unexpected) effects on the consistency and transparency of assessments. The standards to be assessed for the limited programme assessment are rather broad. The NVAO's assessment framework does not provide criteria or instructions on how to weigh or balance the aspects of a programme that fall under one and the same standard. It should be noted that this breadth and lack of instruction is intentional. The NVAO argues that institutions that have passed the institutional assessment deserve a certain amount of trust. As the NVAO framework for limited programme assessment that was published in 2010 puts it: "The positive assessment of the institution inspires sufficient confidence that the quality assurance regarding the quality of the education provided by the institution is effectively guaranteed." Programmes are encouraged to produce critical reflections that focus on their unique characteristics: "The assessment frameworks for limited programme assessments of 2011 and 2014 are structured in a manner allowing programmes ample scope to emphasise their unique character." To some extent, programmes are free to focus on aspects of their profile or mission they consider the most important. Obviously, panels will follow the choice of a programme in the underpinning of their assessment.

The approach panels are expected to take is sometimes described by means of the Dutch word *timmermansoog* (literally: the eye of the carpenter, a phrase that is used by the Minister of Education as well), meaning that a panel focuses more strongly on its overall impression than on all kinds of details and procedures. In this approach, a panel has a certain amount of freedom to determine which aspects of a programme it finds decisive for its assessment. Clearly, there is a certain tension between the approach characterised by the *timmermansoog* and the need to provide consistent and transparent assessments. As a result, it is also difficult to provide explicit written guidance and instructions on how to ensure that assessments are sufficiently consistent. QANU is well aware of this tension.

To conclude, QANU has paid a lot of attention to the consistency and coherence of the assessments of its panels. It uses various documents that aim at enhancing the consistency. QANU ensures that the evidence available is used in a structured and systematic way in the process that leads to the panel's assessment. At the same time, QANU is also aware of the tension between the need for consistency and coherence on the one hand and the approach

characterised by the phrase *timmermansoog* on the other. QANU will continue to aim at improving the consistency and coherence of its assessments in the near future.

Panel recommendation: *QANU should consider extending the length of site visits for complex assessments involving multiple programmers to ensure sufficient time is provided for evidence collection.*

- QANU discusses the programme for a site visit both with the chairperson of the panel and with representatives of the programme(s) to be assessed. The length of a site visit is dependent on and related to the number of programmes to be assessed during that visit. In practice, it varies between one and a half day and three days or, exceptionally, three and a half days. Experience has shown that it is difficult to guarantee the quality of the assessment when a site visit lasts longer than three days.

QANU has elaborated two versions of a 'simple' site visit programme (in which one or two programmes are assessed). In the first version, the interviews to be conducted by the panel are scheduled on one day. In the second version, these interviews are spread over two days. The amount of time reserved for the various interviews is the same in both programmes. Both also contain time slots reserved for internal panel discussions and for studying the written materials made available by the programme(s). QANU prefers (and promotes) the latter version, which provides more time for discussion and reflection among the members of the assessment panel. Unfortunately, it is not always possible to use the latter version, either because of the limited availability of panel members, or because the programme(s) to be assessed have a strong preference for a site visit that lasts one day only.

If a panel has to assess a larger number of programmes, QANU prepares a custom-made programme in close co-operation with the chairperson of the panel and the programmes to be assessed. It always uses the starting point that the panel should have sufficient time for the interviews, for studying written materials and for internal discussions. In the last few years, QANU has on several occasions extended a panel and scheduled parallel sessions of interviews in order to be able to provide sufficient time for evidence collection. As an example, the panel that assessed the degree programmes in Area Studies offered by Leiden University consisted of nine members. During the site visit, that lasted three and a half days, the panel assessed 18 programmes. The programme for the site visit contained three parallel sessions, for which the panel was divided into three smaller panels. After the parallel sessions, the panel gathered as a whole to discuss the findings emerging from the interviews conducted by the smaller panels. In this way, QANU was able to carry out a rather complex assessment in a manageable amount of time.

To conclude, QANU extends the length of site visits when necessary and takes other measures to ensure that a panel is able to collect the relevant evidence it needs to assess a programme. By being flexible and by making custom-made arrangements, QANU is able to conduct complex assessments in which quite a large number of programmes are assessed as well.

Panel recommendation: *As a matter of urgency, QANU should prepare and publish a definitive mission statement which is published explicitly on the QANU website and replicated in core QANU documents, including annual reports, tender specifications and assessment reports.*

- The ENQA panel that assessed QANU in October 2010 rightly pointed out that the statements regarding QANU's mission and vision that were publicly available contained various and significant inconsistencies. Since the panel's site visit, QANU has taken various measures to improve this situation, aiming first of all at formulating an updated version of its mission statement and secondly at using this mission statement consistently on its website and in its relevant documentation.

In 2011, QANU has initiated a complete redesign of its website. QANU has taken this opportunity to look carefully and critically at all the documentation available on the website, including QANU's mission and profile, and adapt it when necessary in order to increase the

accurateness and the consistency with other documentation. This process has resulted in a revised mission statement, while most of the other information available on the website has been rewritten as well. QANU has also revised the format and structure of its annual report. The first annual report that was produced on the basis of this new format was the annual report that covered the year 2010.

Since 2012, QANU's board discussed QANU's mission, vision and strategy on various occasions. The board decided that QANU's mission would in essence remain unchanged. This means that QANU will continue to focus on its core target groups, research universities and their degree programmes and research units, and on its current expertise and experience, which is primarily in the area of quality assurance in higher education in general and universities in particular.

QANU's mission statement is available on QANU's website and in QANU's Annual Reports. QANU decided not to include its mission statement in its assessment reports.

To conclude, QANU's board has defined and agreed on a revised mission statement that has been published on QANU's website and is included in QANU's annual report.

Panel recommendation: *QANU should embed its definitive mission statement explicitly into its operational and strategic planning processes to ensure its mission, goals and objectives are achieved.*

- The revision of QANU's mission statement did not have any serious implications for QANU's operational and strategic planning processes: QANU's core activities, organising and coordinating assessments of degree programmes and research units offered by universities in the Netherlands, remained unchanged. QANU's activities continue to be directly related to and derived from its mission statement, goals and objectives.

QANU continues to monitor its operational and strategic planning processes closely and carefully. It is, for instance, aware of the fact that possible amendments to the Act on higher education and research may have consequences for its approach and working methods.

To conclude, since the revised mission statement does not differ significantly from the old one, there was no need to adapt QANU's operational and strategic planning processes in a fundamental way. At the same time, QANU continues to monitor these planning processes closely and carefully to ensure that QANU's processes are accurate and up to date.

Panel recommendation: *QANU should ensure there are sufficient measures in place internally to mitigate against concerns that threshold standards of domain-specific frameworks are being heavily influenced by the sector.*

- According to the NVAO's assessment framework for limited programme assessments, one of the appendices to a programme's critical reflection contains a "subject-specific reference framework". As a result, the procedure for establishing a domain-specific framework of reference for an assessment has changed. Until 2011, QANU's assessment panels established the frameworks of reference on the basis of a proposal by the programme(s) to be assessed. Since 2011, this is a task of the programme(s) to be assessed, as required by the NVAO's assessment framework. QANU was not in favour of this revision of the procedure, but it has nevertheless adopted its working methods to comply with the new situation.

Quite often, institutions or programmes ask QANU for advice about the development of a domain-specific framework of reference. QANU has written out a series of questions and issues that can be taken into consideration when developing a domain-specific framework of reference or formulating domain-specific requirements. QANU advises programmes, for instance, to refer to existing documents where possible, such as the Benchmark Statements of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, the Reference Points for the design and delivery of programmes in specific disciplines developed within the TUNING project, or the domain-specific framework of reference used in the previous assessment. In addition, QANU advises

programmes to conduct a benchmark, positioning themselves in the discipline they cover and relating that position to that of similar programmes in the Netherlands and abroad.

Since the introduction of the revised assessment frameworks in 2011, QANU asks its assessment panels to assess the domain-specific framework of reference as well, to establish whether it conforms to the requirements of the discipline, is sufficiently ambitious, refers to the most recent developments et cetera. QANU thus aims to verify that the domain-specific framework of reference is a suitable starting point for the assessment.

QANU is aware of the potential risk implied by this revision of the framework: that programmes are in a position to define the threshold standards on the basis of which they are assessed themselves. At the same time, QANU also acknowledges that this risk is limited in the case of cluster assessments, in which the domain-specific framework of reference is jointly developed by the participating programmes and included in every single critical reflection of the programmes to be assessed. Since it is now obligatory for programmes to be assessed in clusters or groups, it is in QANU's view not very likely that the threshold standards have been lowered since 2011.

To conclude, QANU is currently unable to formally ensure that there are measures in place that prevent the sector from influencing the standards laid down in domain-specific frameworks of reference, but it actively aims at supporting programmes in producing frameworks that are explicitly related to independent standards or criteria.

*Panel recommendation: QANU should clarify the procedures employed in the development and monitoring of domain-specific frameworks to ensure they remain at a sufficiently high standard nationally and internationally. QANU should also ensure that evaluation committees can adequately handle cases of justifiable, valid deviation from domain-specific standards to safeguard innovation and profiling of programmes.*

- As described earlier, the procedure for developing domain-specific frameworks of reference was revised as a result of the introduction of new assessment framework at the beginning of 2011. This revision has a clear consequence for QANU's opportunities to adapt the procedures for developing and monitoring domain-specific frameworks. QANU aims at making institutions and programmes aware of the importance of the standards laid down in the frameworks of reference and QANU also asks the assessment panels to verify whether the standards are sufficiently high, both from a national and an international perspective.

QANU is fully aware that innovative programmes or programmes that have a specific profile may not be completely covered by a domain-specific framework of reference, for instance because they deliberately take insights from another, adjacent discipline into account and thus adopt an interdisciplinary approach. In such a case, QANU expects a programme to argue why it has adopted its profile and why it has chosen to deviate from the standard laid down in a domain-specific framework of reference. In accordance with the NVAO's assessment framework, QANU instructs panels to assess such programmes from the perspective of their specific profile, their choice for a perspective or approach that may not be standard. If a programme manages to convince the panel that the deviation from the standard is justifiable and creates an added value, the panel will accept this deviation. Experience shows that panels that assess all programmes in a specific discipline may sometimes be inclined to be critical about deviations from the domain-specific standards. As a result, QANU pays additional attention to the assessment of programmes that have a deviating profile, especially when these programmes are assessed in a cluster of programmes in the same discipline.

To conclude, QANU is currently unable to define or revise the procedures for developing and monitoring domain-specific frameworks of reference, but QANU has actively contributed to maintaining the required level defined by these standards, as described above. In addition, QANU ensures that panels assess programmes that deviate from the standards in a fair and unbiased way.

Panel recommendation: *QANU should review its existing guidelines, procedures and training materials to repackage them into a more concise set of guidance materials thus ensuring its procedures, criteria, processes and the decisions reached as a result operate in a consistent manner.*

- Since the panel's site visit in 2010, QANU has spent a considerable amount of time reviewing and, where necessary, revising its guidelines, procedures and other materials. In some cases, the revision of existing procedures was made necessary by external developments, for instance the introduction of new assessment frameworks in 2011 and 2014 or the publication of, and later on adjustments to, the NVAO's guideline for assessing final theses. In other cases, QANU itself concluded, on the basis of internal discussions and evaluations or as a result of input provided by representatives of programmes that were assessed or panel members who participated in an assessment, that it was necessary to revise or update a document.

Among other things, QANU developed a Quick Reference Guide that aims to cover the complete process of preparing, conducting and finalising an assessment. This protocol contains hyperlinks to other documents. In this way, QANU's project coordinators have easy access to all relevant guidelines and procedures, which enhances the consistency of their activities. In 2013, QANU developed a revised and updated version of this reference guide that is also oriented towards external stakeholders and more strongly structured in a modular way, as a result of which it is easier to use it in specific situations. QANU will soon start using and distributing this reference guide.

To conclude, QANU reviews its guidelines, procedures and other materials more or less on a permanent basis and updates or revises them when necessary. In addition, QANU has developed a reference guide that covers and structures all relevant documentation. In this way, QANU aims at further improving the consistency and transparency of its assessments.

Panel recommendation: *QANU should repackage information on its internal quality measures and processes into a concise Quality Policy to be published on its website.*

- Since the site visit of the ENQA panel, QANU has evaluated and revised its procedures for internal and external quality assurance. QANU has maintained the principle that every report written by one of QANU's project coordinators acting as a secretary is assessed by a colleague who is not involved in the assessment. This colleague especially looks at the consistency of the report and the quality of the argumentation underlying the panel's assessment. The procedure for evaluation of the reports by QANU's board has been revised. Since QANU's Board felt that the quality of the reports is in general more than satisfactory, it decided that it wants to assess a sample of recent reports that have been finalised already twice a year. In addition to these internal quality assurance procedures, QANU project managers invite external stakeholders (panel members and representatives of programmes that had been assessed) to send the director an email with comments, suggestions or criticisms feedback after each assessment. QANU has not yet packaged the procedures into a concise Quality Policy.

To conclude, since the panel's site visit, QANU has aimed at improving its procedures for internal and external quality assurance with a view to developing an overall Quality Policy, but this process has not been completed yet.

Panel recommendation: *QANU should link its Quality Policy to its annual reporting, strategic and operational planning processes to enhance its capacity to monitor achievement against its mission statement, goals and objectives.*

- As explained above, QANU has not yet completed the process leading to an overall Quality Policy. As a result, it has not yet been able to link this Quality Policy to its annual reporting, strategic and operational planning processes. Of course, the various procedures used by QANU for its internal and external quality assurance, the components of the Quality Policy to be developed, are linked to the strategic and operational planning processes. QANU's Board, for example, aims at providing comments and suggestions that further improve the overall quality

of the reports produced by QANU's assessment panels. The outcomes of the evaluations among external stakeholders are also used to take measures to bring about improvements in QANU's operational processes when necessary or possible.

To conclude, since QANU has not yet developed an overall Quality Policy, it has not been able to link this policy to its annual reporting, strategic and operational planning processes, but it has clearly linked the existing procedures for internal and external quality assurance to these processes.

## 14. Current challenges and areas for future development

At the time of QANU's previous review, the revised version of the NVAO's assessment frameworks was being finalised. According to this revised version, institutions of higher education were no longer obliged to involve a quality assurance agency in the assessments of degree programmes. At the time, it was unclear whether this revision would have effect on QANU's position. It turned out to have very little, if any effect at all. Institutions of higher education still involve quality assurance agencies in their assessments and their expertise and experience is widely recognised and appreciated.

This does not mean that QANU does not see challenges for the future. The recent discussions about the development of the system of external quality assurance revealed that some universities prefer a system of institutional accreditation in which their degree programmes do not have to be accredited any longer. In the view of these universities, their degree programmes would still be assessed by external peers, but it would be up to them to decide how these assessments would be organised, because they would be integrated in the system of internal quality assurance. If the approach advocated by these universities would have become predominant in the discussion, it might have had serious implications for QANU. However, the idea of institutional accreditation has been rejected by the House of Representatives. Of course, this idea can always return in the discussions about the future design of the system of external quality assurance, but for the time being assessments of degree programmes leading to accreditation will remain.

It is not clear yet what the implications of the most recent version of the Minister's plans for the revision of the system of external quality assurance will be and in what way QANU will be able to contribute to the assessments that have to be carried out. QANU assumes that it will continue to have a role in the assessments, but this role will be different from its current one. The initial implications will probably be limited, since the number of institutions participating in the pilot will be limited as well.

QANU's biggest challenge will be to deal with the peaks and valleys in the amount of assessments to be carried out. In 2013, the Minister of education explicitly stated that she wanted to reduce the uneven distribution of assessments, a well-known problem for institutions of higher education, quality assurance agencies and the NVAO alike. When the NVAO was adapting the schedule for assessments to enable the introduction of assessment groups in 2014, it decided to ignore the uneven distribution of assessments and to select one priority: that the period of accreditation of degree programmes would not be shortened. QANU presented an alternative for the NVAO's proposal, which led to a more even distribution of assessments, but which was rejected without further ado by the NVAO. As a result of the NVAO's decision, QANU will continue to face peaks and valleys in the future. QANU has shown twice that it is sufficiently flexible and creative to find solutions for the problems that will arise and it assumes that it will be able to do so a third time.

The dilemma QANU has been struggling with for some time now is whether QANU should aim at becoming active in sectors outside higher education in a more structured and permanent way. If QANU aims at broadening its range of activities permanently, it will not be able to restrict such additional activities to valley periods. Extending its range of activities would reduce the problem of peaks and valleys, but it would not solve it once and for all.





## Appendices



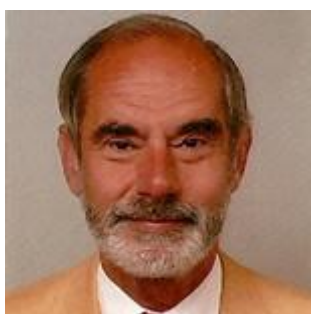
## Appendix 1: QANU's board members and staff members

Members of the board of QANU (reference date: 1 April 2016)



**Prof. dr. P.A.H. (Peter) van Lieshout (chair)**

Studied Psychology and Philosophy in Utrecht Paris. Obtained a PhD in Social Philosophy in 1989 from Groningen University. Part-time Professor of Theory of Care at Utrecht University since 1992. Was Director of the Netherlands Institute for Care and Welfare, Director-General for Health Care at the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, and Project Director-General for Social Security and Care at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment and member of the Scientific Council for Government Policy.



**Prof. dr. J.W. (Jaap) Zwemmer (vice-chair and treasurer)**

Emeritus professor of Tax Law at the University of Amsterdam. Studied Notarial Law and Fiscal Law at this university and received his PhD in 1975. Has been dean of the Law Faculty and the Faculty of Economics of the University of Amsterdam and member of the Advisory Board of the AMC/UvA. Was interim-rector magnificus of the University of Amsterdam in 2007 and was interim-dean of the Academic Centre of Dentistry Amsterdam (ACTA) in 2008/2009. Is a member of the Royal Academy of Science (KNAW).



**Prof. dr. ir. G.M.A. (Guy) Aelterman**

Emeritus professor at the University of Ghent. Until recently, he was Head of office at the Flemish Ministry of Education. Previously among others Vice Chancellor of Artesis University College Antwerp, Executive Board Member and Vice-President of the NVAO (the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders), Vice Chancellor of and professor at the University College Ghent, chairman of VLHORA, chairman of the Flemish Erasmus Committee, chairman of the Council for Higher Education (VLOR).



**Prof. dr. A. (Arie) Nieuwenhuijzen Kruseman**

Emeritus professor in internal medicine at the Maastricht University Medical Centre. Was dean of the Faculty of Medicine and rector magnificus at the same university and president of the Royal Dutch Medical Association (KNMG). He is chair of Nuffic's Board of Trustees, member of the review committee for higher education and research, chair of the Board of Trustees of Stichting Elisabeth Strouven, member of the Board of Trustees at the Stichting Gezondheidscentra Eindhoven and chair of the Board of Governors of the Dutch student chamber music society (NESKO).



**Drs. P.M.M. (Paul) Rullmann**

Studied sociology at VU University Amsterdam. Worked a.o. for the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences and for the Hogeschool Haarlem, where he became a member of the Executive Board in 2000. Moved to Delft University of Technology in May 2002, where he became a member of the Executive Board, responsible for Education and Operational Management. He retired from his position at Delft University of Technology in March 2013. Currently a.o. chair of SURF and the CDHO.



**Prof. dr. G.C. (Gerry) Wakker**

Studied Classics at the University of Amsterdam. She is Professor of Ancient Greek Linguistics at the University of Groningen. Since March 2003 she is a member of the board of the Faculty of Arts, first vice dean (2003-2009), since July 2009 dean. Her prime responsibility is research. She has extensive experience with assessments and (re)accreditation. Was a member of various international assessment committees (Salzburg, Brussel, Gent).

**Staff members (reference date: 1 April 2016)**

**Staff**



**Sietze Looijenga** (1963) is director of QANU since 1 September 2012. He studied Dutch language and literature at the University of Groningen and held different positions in the same university after graduating. In 1999, he exchanged Groningen for Berlin, where he worked at the Free University of Berlin as manager of the Thematic Network Project in the Area of Languages, a project funded by the European Commission. From late 2001 until early 2003 he worked at the Language Centre of the University of Ghent. In March 2003 he joined the VSNU as project leader for quality assurance. He moved to QANU in 2004. For most of 2008, he worked as policy advisor education for the University of Utrecht. After his return to QANU, he became deputy director in April 2009 and director in September 2012.



**Sanderijn de Vries** (1971) started her career as project officer at the Transitional Arrangements Board of Psychologists (ROG). Then she became assistant-manager for operational management of the Private Law Section of the Jurisprudence Faculty of the University of Utrecht. After a short interruption in her career to study, she started working as a staff officer at the office of the European Network of Occupational Therapy of the University of Applied Sciences, Amsterdam. Since 2006 she has been employed by QANU, and was promoted on 1 September 2008 to operational management coordinator. Sanderijn is taking a bachelor's course in Jurisprudence with a minor in Management Sciences at the Open University of the Netherlands.

## Secretariat



**Nathalie Pasveer** (1981) started studying Dutch Law and French language and literature in 1999 at the University of Amsterdam. After obtaining her master's in Dutch law, she started her career as a legal officer and then in August 2005 as law clerk in the district of Utrecht. In the fall of 2013 she has obtained the primary education teaching certificate. Since January 2009 she has been working for QANU as secretary.



**Shanna Willems** (1981) worked for several commercial employers. Over the years, she has taken various courses. In 2005, she joined the office of an agrarian real estate agent in Voorhout. In this period, she took a series of courses for (agrarian) real estate agents. Since August 2011, Shanna works as a secretary for QANU. She also follows a programme in Social-Legal Services.

## Project managers



**Barbara van Balen** (1955) was trained as an education specialist at the University of Utrecht and was associated with the Research and Development of Education Office at the same university, where she carried out evaluations of the education. Then she became education coordinator for the Psychology Faculty of the University of Amsterdam, policy officer for emancipation affairs and head of the service agency for positive action at the University of Amsterdam. She was a manager of the research institute for gender studies and director of a centre for social work. In 2001 she received a PhD degree for research into the position of women at the university. Since 2004 she has carried out various freelance assignments, including some for QANU. Since May 2009 she has been working for QANU. Barbara will leave QANU on 1 June 2016.



**Meg Van Bogaert** (1975) completed her master's degree in Pharmacy and her postdoctoral training as pharmacist. After having worked for a short period as a clinical research pharmacist in a hospital, she started doing research at the Pharmaceutical Sciences Faculty in Utrecht. In 2006 she was awarded a doctorate in psychopharmacology with a thesis entitled: Predisposed to Anxiety: Involvement of 5-HT1A and GABAA receptors. Subsequently, she worked as a regulatory affairs manager at a large, generic pharmaceutical manufacturer. She also worked as a project secretary at ZonMW, the Netherlands Organisation for Healthcare Research and Care Innovation, on the topics Alternatives to Animal Studies and System Biology. Since December 2008, Meg works for QANU as project manager. She is deputy director and research coordinator for QANU.



**Trees Graas** (1981) studied History at VU University of Amsterdam. After obtaining her master's in Modern History, she worked as a study advisor at the Faculty of Arts of VU University of Amsterdam and as a team manager of a curriculum project for the same faculty. She was also involved in a number of small-scale research projects. Then she spent several years as a study advisor and education coordinator for the Faculties of Philosophy and Theology of VU University of Amsterdam. Since November 2009 she has been project manager at QANU.



**Kees-Jan van Klaveren** (1984) studied History and Philosophy at Erasmus University Rotterdam. After that, he was a PhD candidate at the University of Amsterdam. He defended his PhD dissertation *The Independence Syndrome. A Cultural History of the Dutch Health Care System* on 30 September 2015. He was, among other things, a student member of the Management Team at the Faculty of History and Arts in Rotterdam, and Chairman of the PhD Council of the Huizinga Institute (the national Research School for Cultural History) in Amsterdam. He also worked for some time as a teacher for working groups. Since January 2013, he works as a project coordinator at QANU.



**Leonie Kuhlmann** (1989) completed her master's programme Organisations, Change and Management at Utrecht University in 2015. She also followed the extracurricular honour's programme Young Leaders League. Leonie was, among other things, chair of the Young Democrats Utrecht, student member of the board of the faculty, and chair of the students' drama society Amsterdam STA!. From 2013 to 2015, she was fulltime coordinator of the national conference of student representations (Landelijk Overleg Fracties, LOF), the foundation that supports student participation at universities. She developed an e-learning programme for students active in student representation.



**Linda te Marvelde** (1976) studied English Language and Literature at the University of Amsterdam. Since obtaining her master's, she has held various positions at the University of Amsterdam. She was e.g. a project officer for the cooperation organisation UvA-HvA (research university–university of applied sciences) and policy officer for the Academic Affairs Department. In 2007 she left the academic world to become a project leader at the World Cancer Research Fund. In June 2010 she returned to the field of higher education as project leader at QANU. She is coordinator of degree programme assessments at QANU.



**Fiona Schouten** (1980) studied Language and Culture Studies at Utrecht University and obtained a PhD in Spanish Literature from Radboud University Nijmegen in 2009. Her thesis deals with the memory of francoism in recent Spanish novels. She then became director of research and policy at the Nexus Institute in Tilburg, where she was editor of the journal Nexus as well as founder and coordinator of the Nexus Connect youth association. She began working as a QANU project manager in September 2015.





**Adrienne Wieldraaijer-Huijzer** (1986) studied History at VU University of Amsterdam. After completing her master's programme in non-western history, she worked at VU University of Amsterdam as a lecturer Academic Skills. As a student-assistant, she investigated the quality of the research master's programmes of the Faculty of Arts and she contributed to the development of a course in Research Design. Since 2012, she worked for various public institutions as an information management trainee. Since March 2012, Adrienne works for QANU as a project manager.





## **Appendix 2: Frameworks for the assessments of degree programmes and research units**

- NVAO's Assessment frameworks for the higher education accreditation system of the Netherlands (19 December 2014)
- NVAO's Guidelines for the Assessment of Final Projects during External Assessments
- Standard Evaluation Protocol 2015-2021

*-- attached as separate documents --*



### **Appendix 3: Guideline for writing a critical reflection**

QANU, Guideline for writing a critical reflection for a limited programme assessment, September 2015.

*-- attached as a separate document --*



## Appendix 4: Assessments of degree programmes since 2010

### 2010

- Philosophy, disciplinary assessment
- Political Sciences, disciplinary assessment
- Biology, disciplinary assessment
- Information Science, Tilburg University
- Health and Society, Wageningen University
- Applied Communication Studies, Wageningen University
- Aquaculture and Fisheries, Wageningen University
- Medical Psychology, Tilburg University
- Public Policy and Human Development, Maastricht University
- Economics, disciplinary assessment
- Electrical Engineering, Dutch universities of technology
- European Public Health, Maastricht University
- Military Sciences, Dutch Defense Academy
- Health Sciences, Erasmus University Rotterdam
- Health Sciences, Maastricht University
- Islamic Spiritual Care, Islamic University of Rotterdam
- Latin America Studies, Centre for Study and Documentation of Latin-America CEDLA
- Public Policy and Human Development, Maastricht University
- Technical Business and Public Administration, Dutch universities of technology
- Baseline assessment Law, University of Aruba
- Baseline assessment Hospitality & Tourism Management Studies, University of Aruba

### 2011

- Embedded Systems, 3TU (co-operation of Dutch universities of technology)
- Law, disciplinary assessment
- International Development Studies, University of Amsterdam
- Technical Innovation Sciences, Eindhoven University of Technology
- Risk Management, University of Twente
- Public Administration, disciplinary assessment
- Executive Master's of Finance and Control, disciplinary assessment
- Philosophy of Science, Technology and Society, University of Twente
- Sustainable Energy Technology, 3TU (co-operation of Dutch universities of technology)
- Technical Medicine, University of Twente
- Clinical Health Sciences, Utrecht University
- Development Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam
- Public Health, Maastricht University
- International Relations and Diplomacy, University of Leiden

### 2012

- Social Intervention, National Centre of Expertise for Social Intervention LESI
- Urban Management and Development, Erasmus University Rotterdam
- Medicine, disciplinary assessment
- Master's Programme for Legislators, Academy for Legislation
- Liberal Arts and Sciences, Tilburg University
- Education Sciences, disciplinary assessment
- Psychology, disciplinary assessment
- Pedagogical Sciences, disciplinary assessment
- Science Education and Communication, 3TU (co-operation of Dutch universities of technology)
- Communication Sciences, disciplinary assessment
- Life Sciences, Wageningen University

- Sociology, disciplinary assessment
- Systems and Control, 3TU (co-operation of Dutch Universities of Technology)
- Biomedical Sciences, disciplinary assessment
- Chemistry, disciplinary assessment
- General Social Sciences, disciplinary assessment
- Criminology, disciplinary assessment
- Business, Corporate and Maritime Law, Erasmus University Rotterdam
- Cultural Anthropology, disciplinary assessment
- Speech Therapy Sciences, Utrecht University
- Science and Innovation Management, Utrecht University
- Economics, disciplinary assessment
- Earth Sciences, disciplinary assessment
- Liberal Arts and Sciences
- Organisation Sciences, disciplinary assessment
- Pharmacy, disciplinary assessment
- Biomedical Technology, disciplinary assessment
- Mechanical Engineering, disciplinary assessment
- Dentistry, disciplinary assessment
- Water Education, UNESCO/IHE
- Nanoscience, University of Groningen
- Philosophy of a Specific Discipline, disciplinary assessment
- Human Movement Sciences, disciplinary assessment
- Information Sciences, disciplinary assessment
- Building Engineering, disciplinary assessment
- Environmental and Energy Management, University of Twente
- Geomatics, Delft University of Technology
- Oncology, VU University of Amsterdam

## 2013

- Sociology, VU University of Amsterdam
- Erasmus Mundus Programme in Bioethics, Radboud University Nijmegen
- Area Studies, disciplinary assessment
- History, International Relations and European Studies, disciplinary assessment
- Health Professions Education, Maastricht University
- Communication and Information Sciences and Media Studies, disciplinary assessment
- Arts and Culture, disciplinary assessment
- Organisation Sciences, Tilburg University
- Technical Business Administration, University of Groningen
- Theology and Religion Studies, disciplinary assessment
- Humanistic Studies, University for Humanistic Studies
- Social Geography, disciplinary assessment
- Criminal Law and Criminology, University of Groningen
- Medicine, Leiden University
- Automotive Technology, Eindhoven University of Technology
- Artificial Intelligence, disciplinary assessment
- Business Administration, disciplinary assessment
- Environmental Sciences, disciplinary assessment
- Affective Neurosciences, Maastricht University
- Informatics, disciplinary assessment
- Archeology, disciplinary assessment
- Liberal Arts and Sciences, Amsterdam University College
- Technical Medicine, University of Twente
- Philosophy of a Specific Discipline, University of Amsterdam
- Linguistics and Literary Studies, disciplinary assessment
- Mathematics, disciplinary assessment

## 2014

- Aerospace Engineering, Delft University of Technology
- Public Administration and Organisation Studies, Utrecht University
- Advanced Technology, University of Twente
- Business, Corporate and Maritime Law, Erasmus University Rotterdam (additional assessment)
- Urbanism, Delft University of Technology
- Physics and Astronomy, disciplinary assessment
- Informatics, Leiden University (additional assessment)
- Social Geography and Planology, disciplinary assessment
- Industrial Design, disciplinary assessment
- Management, Nyenrode Business University
- Forensic Psychology, Maastricht University
- Chemistry, University of Groningen (additional assessment)
- Intellectual Property Law and Knowledge Management, Maastricht University
- Health Food Innovation Management, Maastricht University
- European Public Health en Global Health, Maastricht University
- Biomolecular Sciences, VU University of Amsterdam (additional assessment)
- Dentistry, Academic Centre for Dentistry Amsterdam
- Accountancy, University of Groningen
- Communication Sciences, Radboud University Nijmegen (additional assessment)
- Criminology, Leiden University and Utrecht University (additional assessment)
- Teacher training programmes and educational minors, disciplinary assessment
- Celtic Languages and Cultures, Utrecht University (additional assessment)

## 2015

- Geo-Information Science and Earth Observation, Universiteit Twente
- Creative Technology, University of Twente
- Earth Sciences, University of Amsterdam (additional assessment)
- Communication and Information Sciences (additional assessments)
- Media Studies (additional assessment)
- Arts and Culture Studies (additional assessment)
- Theater Sciences (additional assessment)
- Media and Information Studies (additional assessment)
- English Language and Culture (additional assessment)
- Literary Studies (additional assessment)
- Biology, disciplinary assessment
- Energy and Environmental Sciences, University of Groningen (additional assessment)
- Criminal Law and Criminology, University of Groningen (additional assessment)
- History, International Relations and European Studies (additional assessments)
- Urban Management and Development, Erasmus University Rotterdam (additional assessment)
- Theology and Religion Studies (additional assessments)
- Archeology, University of Amsterdam (additional assessment)
- Research master's programmes Economic and Financial Research and Business Research, Maastricht University
- Liberal Arts and Sciences and Maastricht Science Programme, Maastricht University





## Appendix 5: Assessments of research units since 2010

### 2010

- Technology, Management and Policy 3TU
- Pharmaceutical Sciences UU
- Chemistry LEI, RUG, WUR, RU, UvA, VU, UU
- Biomedical Engineering TUE
- Astronomy & NOVA LEI, UU, UvA, RUG, RU
- Innovation and Entrepreneurship IGS-UT
- Centre for Infectious Disease Control RIVM-CIB
- Sanquin Molecular Cell Biology & Plasma Proteins
- Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology LEI
- Veterinary Science UU (mid-term)
- Applied Mathematics TUE, TUD, UT, RUG
- Teacher Training Institutes UU, UvA, VU, RUG, LEI

### 2011

- Sanquin Donor Studies
- Evaluation Knowledge Centre IEP (HRO)
- Technology, Management, Policy and Industrial Engineering
- Institute for Innovation and Governance studies
- Utrecht Institute for Pharmaceutical Sciences (UIPS)
- Industrial Design Engineering UT, TUE

### 2012

- Physics
- Electrical Engineering
- Psychology
- Biology
- Civil Engineering, TUD, UT
- Behavioral Sciences Institute (BSI), RU
- Veterinary Sciences, Utrecht University
- Research Institute for History and Culture (OGC), UU
- Centre for Language Studies (CLS), RU

### 2013

- Eindhoven School of Education, TU/e
- Pedagogics LEI, RUG, UT, UU, UvA, VU
- Tilburg School of Humanities, TU
- Humanities UvA, VU
- Humanities LEI: LIAS, LUCAS, ACPA, LUCL, LUIH en LUCSoR
- Sanquin immunotherapy, Sanquin
- Philosophy TUD, TUE, EUR, UL, UvT, UT, UU and VU
- Donders Institute, RU
- Theology: theological universities Apeldoorn and Kampen, Protestants Theologische Universiteit, VU, UU, TU, RUG
- Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, EUR

### 2014

- Organisation Sciences, TU
- Centre for Learning Sciences and Technologies, OU
- School of Economics and Management, TU

- Center for Innovation Research, TU
- Leiden University Centre for the Study of Islam and Society, LU
- Human Geography and Planning RUG, UU, UvA
- Mechanical Engineering, TUE, UT
- Communication Sciences, VU, UvA, UT
- Dynamics and Governance of Science, Technology and Innovation in Society, UT
- Sociology RUG, UU, RU, EUR, VU, UvA, UvT, ICS
- University for Humanistic Studies
- Risk Assessment of and research and policy advice on chemical substances and products, RIVM

## **2015**

- Public Administration LEI, UU, EUR, UT, VU
- Earth Sciences VU, UU
- NISIS (Netherlands Interuniversity School for Islamic Studies).
- Chemical Engineering 3TU