



NVAO • FLANDERS

# FRAMEWORK FOR THE EUROPEAN APPROACH FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE OF JOINT PROGRAMMES

NOVEMBER 2020



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*This assessment framework relates only to joint programmes offered jointly by higher education institutions from two or more countries and does not address the quality assurance of programmes delivered jointly by different institutions from a single country.*

This assessment framework is only applicable to procedures coordinated by NVAO.

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# 1 Introduction

This assessment framework is an elaboration of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (October 2014), as approved by the ministers of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in May 2015, hereafter referred to as the European Approach.

As is the case for the European Approach, this assessment framework should be applied depending on the needs of the cooperating higher education institutions and the requirements of their national frameworks.

In the Flemish quality assurance system, joint programmes that award joint degrees need to apply the European Approach when they are assessed. In line with the European Approach joint programmes are understood as integrated curricula coordinated and offered jointly by different higher education institutions from countries in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), (and possibly also non-EHEA countries), and leading to double/multiple degrees: separate degrees awarded by higher education institutions offering the joint programme attesting the successful completion of this programme; or a joint degree: a single document awarded by higher education institutions offering the joint programme and nationally acknowledged as the recognised award of the joint programme.

This assessment framework contains the assessment principle and the assessment procedure that will be applied when NVAO coordinates the assessment of a joint programme according to the European Approach.

It is important to note that both new joint programmes and joint programmes already offered can be assessed using this framework. In case of a new joint programme, this framework is to be applied as a framework for an ex ante assessment of the potential quality of a new programme. Where the assessment of existing programmes looks at actual achievement and demonstration, an ex ante assessment looks at what can be achieved by the programme put forward. The assessment principle is then to be interpreted as referring to potential quality and what can be achieved.

## I. Assessment principle

The proposed assessment principle comprises two aspects: on the one hand the assessment ground underpinning the assessment of the quality of a joint programme as expressed in the European Approach, being the Standards for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes in the EHEA, and on the other hand the assessment scale and assessment rules applied by the panel of experts carrying out the assessment for its substantiated judgement regarding the quality of the joint programme.

## II. Assessment procedure

The assessment procedure is coordinated by NVAO and is an elaboration of the Procedure for External Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes in the EHEA, resulting in an accreditation decision by NVAO.

## 2 Assessment principle

### 2.1 Assessment ground – Standards for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

#### 1. Eligibility

##### 1.1 Status

The institutions that offer a joint programme should be recognised as higher education institutions by the relevant authorities of their countries. Their respective national legal frameworks should enable them to participate in the joint programme and, if applicable, to award a joint degree. The institutions awarding the degree(s) should ensure that the degree(s) belong to the higher education degree systems of the countries in which they are based.

##### 1.2 Joint design and delivery

The joint programme should be offered jointly, involving all cooperating institutions in the design and delivery of the programme.

##### 1.3 Cooperation Agreement

The terms and conditions of the joint programme should be laid down in a cooperation agreement. The agreement should in particular cover the following issues:

- Denomination of the degree(s) awarded in the programme;
- Coordination and responsibilities of the partners involved regarding management and financial organisation (including funding, sharing of costs and income etc.);
- Admission and selection procedures for students;
- Mobility of students and teachers;
- Examination regulations, student assessment methods, recognition of credits and degree awarding procedures in the consortium.

#### 2. Learning Outcomes

##### 2.1 Level [ESG 1.2]

The intended learning outcomes should align with the corresponding level in the Framework for Qualifications in the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA), as well as the applicable national qualifications framework(s).

##### 2.2 Disciplinary field

The intended learning outcomes should comprise knowledge, skills, and competencies in the respective disciplinary field(s).

##### 2.3 Achievement [ESG 1.2]

The programme should be able to demonstrate that the intended learning outcomes are achieved.

##### 2.4 Regulated Professions

If relevant for the specific joint programme, the minimum agreed training conditions specified in the European Union Directive 2005/36/EC, or relevant common trainings frameworks established under the Directive, should be taken into account.

### **3. Study Programme [ESG 1.2]**

#### **3.1 Curriculum**

The structure and content of the curriculum should be fit to enable the students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

#### **3.2 Credits**

The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) should be applied properly and the distribution of credits should be clear.

#### **3.3 Workload**

A joint bachelor programme will typically amount to a total student workload of 180-240 ECTS-credits; a joint master programme will typically amount to 90-120 ECTS-credits and should not be less than 60 ECTS-credits at second cycle level (credit ranges according to the FQ-EHEA); for joint doctorates there is no credit range specified. The workload and the average time to complete the programme should be monitored.

### **4. Admission and Recognition [ESG 1.4]**

#### **4.1. Admission**

The admission requirements and selection procedures should be appropriate in light of the programme's level and discipline.

#### **4.2. Recognition**

Recognition of qualifications and of periods of studies (including recognition of prior learning) should be applied in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and subsidiary documents.

### **5. Learning, Teaching and Assessment [ESG 1.3]**

#### **5.1 Learning and teaching**

The programme should be designed to correspond with the intended learning outcomes, and the learning and teaching approaches applied should be adequate to achieve those. The diversity of students and their needs should be respected and attended to, especially in view of potential different cultural backgrounds of the students.

#### **5.2 Assessment of students**

The examination regulations and the assessment of the achieved learning outcomes should correspond with the intended learning outcomes. They should be applied consistently among partner institutions.

### **6. Student Support [ESG 1.6]**

The student support services should contribute to the achievement of the intended learning outcomes. They should take into account specific challenges of mobile students.

### **7. Resources [ESG 1.5 & 1.6]**

#### **7.1 Staff**

The staff should be sufficient and adequate (qualifications, professional and international experience) to implement the study programme.

#### **7.2 Facilities**

The facilities provided should be sufficient and adequate in view of the intended learning outcomes.

## 8. Transparency and Documentation [ESG 1.8]

Relevant information about the programme like admission requirements and procedures, course catalogue, examination and assessment procedures etc. should be well documented and published by taking into account specific needs of mobile students.

## 9. Quality Assurance [ESG 1.1 & part 1]

The cooperating institutions should apply joint internal quality assurance processes in accordance with part one of the ESG.

## 2.2 Assessment scales and assessment rule

### Assessment scale at standard level

With respect to the above standards, the panel gives a judgement of 'compliant' or 'non-compliant':

#### Compliant:

the programme complies to the standard in a way that can reasonably be expected at an international level as it demonstrates an internationally acceptable quality level across the entire spectrum of the underlying aspects.

#### Non-compliant:

the programme does not comply to the standard in a way that can reasonably be expected at an international level as it fails to demonstrate an internationally acceptable quality level across the entire spectrum of the underlying aspects.

### Assessment scale for the final judgement

The assessment of the quality of the joint programme prompts one of the following three judgements: positive, conditionally positive, or negative.

#### Assessment rule for the final judgement

- Positive:  
All standards are judged compliant by the panel.
- Conditionally positive:  
One or more but not all standards are judged non-compliant; the panel considers it possible to improve the programme in such a way that all standards will be compliant when re-assessed within a period of three years.
- Negative:  
None of the standards are judged compliant, or in case one or more but not all standards are judged non-compliant, the panel considers it impossible to improve the programme in such a way that all standards will be compliant when re-assessed within a period of three years.



## 3 Assessment procedure

### 3.1 Preliminary consultations

In the lead-up to the official application, (one of) the cooperating institutions offering the joint programme organise(s) preliminary consultations with NVAO. These should be finalised three months before the potential submission date of the application file. The following aspects are to be dealt with:

- Timing and steps in the procedure, including the dialogue between the panel and the joint programme;
- Profile of the assessment panel and combination of expertise commanded by the members;
- Approach towards the Self-Assessment Report and documentation to be submitted – special attention is paid to the demonstration of eligibility;
- Organisation of the site visit;
- Type of decisions required and for which of the cooperating institutions;
- Which national authorities of the countries in which the cooperating higher education institutions are based must be contacted by NVAO.

The cooperating institutions also inform NVAO on the institution that will be the liaison institution during the assessment procedure.

### 3.2 Demonstration of eligibility

Following the preliminary consultations, the cooperating institutions provide NVAO with the following documentation:

1. Documentation showing that the institutions that offer the joint programme are recognised as higher education institutions by the relevant authorities of their countries. Their respective national legal frameworks enable them to participate in the joint programme and, if applicable, to award a joint degree. The institutions awarding the degree(s) ensure that the degree(s) belong to the higher education degree systems of the countries in which they are based. [1.1 Status]
2. Brief documentation to demonstrate that the joint programme is offered jointly, involving all cooperating institutions in the design and delivery of the programme. [1.2 Joint design and delivery]
3. The signed cooperation agreement in which the terms and conditions of the joint programme are laid down. The agreement should in particular cover the following issues:
  - a. Denomination of the degree(s) awarded in the programme;
  - b. Coordination and responsibilities of the partners involved regarding management and financial organisation (including funding, sharing of costs and income etc.);
  - c. Admission and selection procedures for students;
  - d. Mobility of students and teachers;
  - e. Examination regulations, student assessment methods, recognition of credits and degree awarding procedures in the consortium. [1.3 Cooperation Agreement]

NVAO will undertake a preliminary screening of the eligibility criteria and provide the cooperating institutions with substantiated feedback on their documentation.

### 3.3 Self-Assessment Report

The cooperating institutions of the joint programme prepare a Self-Assessment Report containing comprehensive information that demonstrates the compliance of the

programme with the Standards for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes in the EHEA, as included under section '2.1 Assessment ground'. Attention is paid to the international context within which the programme is taught and to the distinctive feature of the programme as a joint endeavour of higher education institutions from more than one national higher education system.

The Self-Assessment Report is a self-contained document, written in English, that can be read in its own right. It comprises a maximum of 25 pages, excluding the appendices with required documentation as listed in Chapter 5. The format and substantiation of the report are not specified; they fall under the autonomy of the cooperating institutions of the joint programme. Information that is (publicly) available on the websites of the cooperating institutions may be provided by means of a web link.

### 3.4 Application

The assessment procedure starts when an application for joint programme assessment is submitted to NVAO by the liaison institution. Applications must meet the following procedural requirements: they must be submitted in electronic format via [aanvraag@nvao.net](mailto:aanvraag@nvao.net), comprising an application letter signed by or on behalf of representatives of the boards of the cooperating institutions and a Self-Assessment Report as described in paragraph 3.2. Upon his/her request, the liaison institution will send a hard copy version to a panel member.

Applications must be submitted no later than ten months before expiry of the joint programme's current accreditation or recognition as a new joint programme.

### 3.5 Admissibility

NVAO will check the admissibility of the application to verify whether the procedural requirements have been met. If the application is inadmissible, the coordinating institution will be informed accordingly within a timeframe of 15 calendar days. Subsequently, the institutions have 30 calendar days to complete their application, in consultation with the process coordinator from NVAO. Should they fail to submit a full dossier within the stipulated time, the application will be declared definitively inadmissible.

### 3.6 Payment for the procedure

Once the application has been found admissible, the coordinating institution will receive a request for full payment of the cost of the assessment procedure. The rate applicable to this procedure is published on NVAO's website: [www.nvao.net](http://www.nvao.net).

### 3.7 Composition of the panel

NVAO appoints the panel that will conduct the joint programme assessment. The review by peers is at the heart of the Flemish quality assurance system. A panel consists of a number of experts who have the authority to assess the quality of the joint programme. In order to be able to take the international context of the joint programme into account, NVAO always confers with the coordinating institution when convening a panel.

The assessment panel comprises a minimum of four members, among whom a student; it is supported by an NVAO process coordinator and possibly an external secretary. The latter two are not part of the panel.

In order to warrant an objective and fair assessment, NVAO ensures the independence of each of the panel members. This means that over the five years prior to the appointment

of the panel, its members must not have had any connections or ties with the cooperating institutions offering the joint programme. All the panel members, the secretary, and the process coordinator must sign a code of deontology. This code of deontology is published on the NVAO website.

The panel must be authoritative. To this end, it combines the following forms of expertise:

- In order to take maximum account of a joint programme's specific context and to survey the broader framework within which a joint programme is taught, the panel must collectively command thorough knowledge of the higher education systems of the institutions involved and the language(s) of instruction used, and therefore include members from at least two countries involved in the consortium;
- International expertise is represented on the panel in order to enable it to verify whether the joint programme meets common international standards in terms of content, orientation, and level, and insofar as applicable, whether it meets the requirements that the international professional field sets for graduates;
- Subject-specific expertise is focused on the developments in the discipline. A subject-specific expert teaches or has taught within the same or a similar programme with the same orientation, and contributes to the development of the professional practice, the discipline or the field of study;
- Educational expertise refers to recent experience in teaching or educational development at the relevant programme level and to expertise regarding the education and learning/teaching formats provided by the joint programme;
- Evaluation expertise enables the panel to assess whether the joint programme is capable of assuring the quality of education;
- The professional field expert commands a good overview of the requirements that the professional field sets for graduates;
- Student-related expertise enables the panel to verify whether the joint programme is student-centred and safeguards the interests of students in such aspects as the information provision to students, student facilities, student counselling and guidance, and student participation. Preferably, student experts have experience as a student representative within a programme or institution.

Panel members are still active (not necessarily employed) in their field of expertise at the time at which the panel is appointed. This also applies to the student who sits on the panel.

NVAO informs the coordinating institution of the panel composition. The coordinating institution has the right to lodge a substantiated objection to the panel composition within a timeframe of 15 calendar days. In addition, the coordinating institution is required to inform NVAO, within that same timeframe, of any additional and relevant information it has regarding the expertise and independence of panel members.

Panel members will receive a training by NVAO prior to the procedure. This training prepares the panel members for their tasks and responsibilities.

### 3.8 Dialogue

NVAO organises the dialogue between the panel and the joint programme in consultation with the coordinating institution. The panel is allowed a minimum period of six weeks to peruse the Self-Assessment Report and the related documentation. As a rule, this dialogue takes a full day (preceded by a preparatory meeting of the panel) and a site visit is restricted to one location (although the provision at all locations has to be taken into account).

The schedule of the dialogue is structured in a manner that enables the panel to fulfil its duties. The panel is asked to flesh out the schedule on the basis of a template provided by NVAO; the details are discussed with the coordinating institution. The process coordinator liaises between the panel and the coordinating institution in this matter. Once the schedule is finalised, the coordinating institution may indicate the positions for which it wants to propose discussion partners. The dialogue includes discussions with representatives of all cooperating institutions.

The following discussion partners must definitely be involved throughout the dialogue:

- Management of the institutions;
- Management/Staff responsible for the joint programme;
- Staff responsible for the quality assurance of the joint programme;
- Staff of the student support services;
- (Intended) Teaching staff;
- Students enrolled in the joint programme (if applicable);
- Other relevant stakeholders, such as alumni (if applicable) and representatives from the professional field.

Prior to, during or after the site visit, the panel may request additional information from the joint programme in order to substantiate its assessment. The panel must justify such a request. The list of documents studied is included in the assessment report.

Considering that a panel may request additional information, or the institutions wish to present further information during a site visit, the schedule features an open timeslot. This also enables the institutions to submit additional documentation to the panel or to schedule additional meetings.

If, during the assessment process, matters arise that could impact the independence of the assessment, stakeholders such as panel members, process coordinators, secretaries, staff of the institutions, or students, may report such matters to NVAO via the complaints procedure available on NVAO's website.

### 3.9 Assessment and assessment report

The assessment conducted by the panel covers all standards from section '2.1 Assessment ground' and pays particular attention to the distinctive features of joint programmes. This is also reflected in the assessment report, containing relevant evidence, analysis and conclusions with regard to these Standards, and in the recommendations for developing the programme further.

During a site visit and the preparatory meeting, the secretary collects all the input from the panel members and draws up a report that constitutes the basis for the assessment report.

The panel makes a final judgement on the three-point scale – 'positive decision', 'conditionally positive decision', 'negative decision' in line with the assessment rule as formulated in section '2.2 Assessment scales and assessment rule'.

The assessment report, written in English, comprises 20 to 25 pages and is preceded by a concise summary of the findings and the judgement of the panel. The assessment report must include the following data:

- The administrative data of the institutions and the joint programme as listed in Chapter 4;
- The composition of the panel;
- The schedule of the dialogue and any site visit;
- An overview of the material studied;

- A list of abbreviations.

After all the panel members have approved the assessment report, the panel chair will endorse the report. The draft assessment report is forwarded to NVAO within four weeks after the site visit. NVAO assesses the internal consistency of the report and the feasibility of the judgement; if necessary, NVAO will suggest adjustments to the panel to clarify the findings or enhance the substantiation of the judgement. Ownership of the assessment report remains vested with the panel. The draft assessment report is forwarded to the coordinating institution within six weeks after the site visit. The coordinating institution is given a term of 15 calendar days to comment on a draft version of the assessment report and request correction of factual errors. The panel is obliged to respond in writing within a term of 15 calendar days. Subsequently, the assessment report is definitively endorsed by the panel.

After this definitive endorsement by the panel, NVAO's decision-making procedure commences.

### 3.10 Decision-making

NVAO will come to its decision on the basis of the published assessment report, in accordance with the assessment scale and assessment rule as set out in paragraph 2.2. In case of a new programme and in line with the legal framework, a positive or conditionally positive final judgement by the panel should lead to a positive decision by NVAO.

In its decision, NVAO may deviate from the judgement contained in the assessment report, substantiating its reasons to do so. When drawing up its draft decision, NVAO may ask the institution and/or the panel for additional information, explanations, and clarifications. NVAO will forward the draft decision and the underlying assessment report to the liaison institution.

NVAO affords the cooperating institutions the opportunity to formulate comments and/or objections to the draft accreditation decision. The liaison institution is to react within a 15-calendar-day limitation period, which commences as from the day after their receipt.

The draft can be amended if necessary. NVAO forwards its final decision with the underlying assessment report from the panel to the liaison institution and to the Flemish Minister of Education or the relevant national authority. The accreditation period is in line with the appropriate legal framework. The decision states that the joint programme should be reviewed periodically within a maximum period of 6 years and the obligation to inform NVAO about changes in the consortium offering the joint programme.

### 3.11 Objections and appeal procedure

Any draft decision by NVAO is open to an internal appeal to NVAO by raising objections as mentioned in section 3.9 'Decision-making' and any final decision by NVAO is open to an external appeal to the Council of State, in accordance with the 'Regulations regarding governance principles concerning the decision-making procedures of the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders – NVAO Flanders' [In Dutch: 'Reglement inzake bestuursbeginselen van toepassing bij de besluitvorming door de Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie – NVAO Vlaanderen'].

### 3.12 Publication

After the decision-making procedure, NVAO publishes the decision and the underlying assessment report on its website, and forwards both documents to the Flemish Minister of Education or the national authority involved.

## 4 Required documentation

### Administrative data regarding the cooperating institutions:

1. name;
2. address, website;
3. name, position, telephone number and email address of the liaison of the coordinating institution [not included in the assessment report].

### Administrative data regarding the joint programme:

1. the degree, the qualification of the degree, and if applicable, the specification of the degree;
2. if applicable, the title that holders of the degree conferred by this programme may use;
3. the field of study, part of a field of study or fields of study within which the programme is categorised;
4. the majors/specialisations, if any;
5. the listing of potential programme routes for working students, full-time/part-time education, day/evening trajectories, different formats of certification;
6. the location(s) at which the programme is taught;
7. the language(s) of instruction;
8. the workload expressed in credits;
9. the programme-specific learning outcomes;
10. the necessary information about the respective national frameworks of the cooperating institutions that foreign agencies and experts might need in order to appreciate the context, especially the positioning of the programme within the national higher education systems.

## Colophon

QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM FLANDERS

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Assessment framework for the European Approach

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