

## Background and explanation of the formal aspects of the Accreditation Protocol

In July 1991, the government decided to establish an independent committee attached to the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) with responsibility for accrediting research schools (Royal Decree of 6 August 1991, Bulletin of Acts, Orders and Decrees 1991, 463). In that same year, the KNAW established the Research School Accreditation Committee (the Committee) and adopted the Accreditation Protocol for Research Schools for the first time. The protocol and the procedure have since been amended, in consultation with the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) and Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), in 1995, 2001, 2002, 2005 and 2010.

The Accreditation Protocol for Research Schools lays down the procedure and the periods to be observed for the submission and handling of applications for accreditation. The Protocol also formulates the standards of care to be observed by the Accreditation Committee. The Dutch General Administrative Law Act [*Algemene wet bestuursrecht*] applies to decisions of the Accreditation Committee, which means that the accreditation procedure must provide for objections to decisions, as well as subsequent appeals to the administrative law division of the district court. The Protocol describes the tasks and procedures of the KNAW's Complaints Committee with respect to decisions of the Accreditation Committee. The grounds on which the Complaints Committee assesses a decision of the Accreditation Committee that has been challenged are specified in Article 6 of the Protocol. In principle, the Accreditation Committee is obliged to make a decision on an objection within ten weeks. The law provides that the Committee can unilaterally decide to postpone a decision once by four weeks. These periods are taken into account in determining the period within which the Complaints Committee must give its advice.

The criteria for accreditation are an important element of the Protocol. They were formulated in consultation with the VSNU and NWO and represent adaptations of the ten characteristics of research schools as set out in the report of the Research School Advisory Commission (Rinnooy Kan Commission), which were adopted – with some refinement and accentuation – in the government's position paper of 24 January 1991.

In Article 6 of the Protocol, questions that the Accreditation Committee must in any case address in its assessment of the plans submitted for research schools are formulated for each criterion.

The questions to be answered for each of the criteria in Article 6 can be divided into two categories:

**Assessment:** the aspects on which the Accreditation Committee must give its own judgment.

These are the questions 1a, b, c, e; 2a; 5a, b; 7 a, b, c, d; 8a, b, c.

**Benchmark:** the aspects on which the Committee has to establish whether applicants have incorporated them thoroughly and carefully enough in their plans ("meta-assessment"). The benchmark points are 1d, f; 2b, c, d, e; 3a, b; 4a, b, c; 5c; 6; 7e; 9.

It is expressly reserved to the Accreditation Committee to weigh up the strengths and weaknesses of each proposal on the basis of the criteria and to arrive at a final decision. In that context, it should be noted that absolute standards only apply for a few of the criteria. Criteria 5 (size) and 7 (the formal basis of the research school) generally contain absolute elements. The other criteria are generally compensatory, in other words the failure to meet such a criterion will not immediately cause the application to be rejected but can be compensated by a higher rating on other benchmarks.

## **ACCREDITATION PROTOCOL FOR RESEARCH SCHOOLS**

The General Board of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences;

Having regarded Article 9 of the Academy's Regulations;

Having regarded the Regulations of the Research School Accreditation Committee, adopted by the General Board of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences by resolution in October 1991 and amended by resolution on 7 June 1995, on 17 December 2002, on 1 January 2005, and on 29 March 2010;

Having heard the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research and the Association of Universities in the Netherlands;

Hereby resolves to adopt the following protocol.

### **Accreditation procedure for research schools**

#### *Article 1*

1. A research school shall be accredited by the Research School Accreditation Committee (hereinafter: the Committee) pursuant to the procedure laid down in this protocol, with the Committee assessing an application for accreditation in accordance with the terms and conditions of this protocol.
2. Accreditation shall not be issued subject to conditions precedent or conditions subsequent.
3. Accreditation by the Committee, or a resolution by the Committee to refuse an application for accreditation, shall become irrevocable after the period for submitting a notice of objection to the Committee has elapsed without such notice of objection being submitted, or after the period for appealing against a ruling on the notice of objection has elapsed without such appeal being lodged.

### **Submission of application for accreditation**

#### *Article 2*

1. An application for the accreditation of a research school shall be submitted to the Committee by the Board of Governors of a university as referred to in Chapter 9 of the Higher Education and Research Act (*Wet op het Hoger onderwijs en Wetenschappelijk onderzoek*), hereinafter: the WHW.
2. An application for accreditation as referred to in Article 2.1 shall be submitted to the Committee at the address of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences in Amsterdam.
3. An application for accreditation as referred to in Article 2.1 shall be submitted prior to 1 January of the year in which the Committee is asked to grant the accreditation.

### **Committee procedure**

#### *Article 3*

1. The Committee shall decide on an application for accreditation prior to 1 July of the year following the year in which it received the application. Accreditation or re-accreditation shall commence on the same 1 July and shall remain valid for a period of six years.

2. The Committee may postpone a decision on an application for accreditation for no more than six months. Written notification of the postponement shall be sent to the Board of Governors that submitted the application and the Board of the Academy. The notification shall state the ultimate date on which a decision will be taken.
3. The Committee shall send a written, dated document to the Board of Governors that submitted the application notifying it of its decision and explaining its reasons.
4. The Committee shall notify the applicant that it may submit a notice of objection to this decision to the Committee within six weeks of the date on which the decision was sent.
5. Any decision not taken in time by the Committee shall be regarded as a decision to reject an application.

## **Complaints Committee**

### *Article 4*

1. Complaints regarding the Research School Accreditation Committee will be referred to the Complaints Committee.
2. The task of the Complaints Committee shall be to advise on the validity of the notices of objection submitted to the Committee by Boards of Governors against decisions taken by the Committee on the accreditation of research schools.

### *Article 5*

1. The Complaints Committee shall assess the validity of the notice of objection submitted to it for its opinion by considering the application for accreditation, the advice given by any external experts who have been consulted, as well as the Committee's decision.
2. The Complaints Committee shall assess the Committee's decision on the following grounds:
  - a. the decision is contrary to a rule that is binding on all the parties;
  - b. the decision reached by the Committee is not reasonable, in view of the accreditation criteria;
  - c. the arguments supporting the decision are inadequate;
  - d. the decision was not prepared with due care;
  - e. equal cases were treated unequally;
  - f. the decision was based on a change of policy of which the parties were not aware and were not adequately informed in advance.
3. The Complaints Committee shall advise on a notice of objection within four weeks, but in any case no later than eight weeks, of receipt of the objection. If the Complaints Committee decides to issue its opinion after the four-week period, it shall so notify the Committee. It shall provide reasons for its opinion concerning the notice of objection.
4. The Complaints Committee shall send a dated letter to the Committee notifying it of its opinion concerning the validity of the notice of objection. The Committee shall then decide on the notice of objection, taking the Complaints Committee's opinion into account. Should the Committee decide that some or all of the notice of objection is unfounded, the party submitting the notice of objection shall be given the opportunity to lodge an appeal against this decision with the administrative law section of the district court in whose jurisdiction that party has its registered office. The appeal must be submitted within six weeks of the date on which the decision on the notice of objection was sent.

## Accreditation criteria

### Article 6

The Committee shall base its decision to issue or refuse accreditation on the following criteria.

To judge these aspects, the accreditation committee will use the evaluations reports produced according to the SEP protocol, not older than three years before the submission date for (re-)accreditation. (For details on relation of SEP reports and ECOS, see Introduction and the Application Form.)

1. The research school provides a well organized , coherent and productive research environment for the PhD programme. Important aspects to review this criterion are :
  - a. Research mission
  - b. National and international reputation in scientific community
  - c. Coherence of research programme, including output
  - d. Cooperation with Dutch and foreign groups (co-publications, projects)
  - e. Basis in outstanding research groups, according to international standards
  - f. Investment of time by these researchers in the schools research and training programme.
  - g. Capability in attracting external funds (including international funds)
  
2. The research school offers a sound and institutionalised programme in which students are trained to be independent researchers, with the rights and duties of the students being well documented.

In determining the extent to which the research school meets this criterion, the Committee shall consider the following questions.

  - a. Does the training and supervision programme have clearly structured group and individual components?
  - b. Does the training and supervision programme have clearly formulated final attainment aims?
  - c. Are the aims and policies regarding the overall success rate and average duration of PhD projects adequately defined and quantified?
  - d. Is the object of the programme described in terms of the professional fields in which the students will in fact be working in the future?
  - e. Are the rights and duties of the instructors and students clearly documented?
  
3. The research school has a progressive long-range work programme, compiled through a process of careful selection, prioritisation and approval of research projects, with the research school having a fixed procedure for selecting PhD candidates.

In determining the extent to which the research school meets this criterion, the Committee shall consider the following questions.

  - a. Does the research school have a suitable procedure for selecting, prioritising and approving research projects for PhD candidates;
  - b. Do the selection procedure and standards applied when admitting PhD candidates guarantee the quality of the future researchers and, additionally, is this procedure aimed at achieving a balanced ratio between male and female PhD candidates?
  
4. The research school offers both group instruction and individual training and supervision within the context of a four-year programme.

In determining the extent to which the research school meets this criterion, the Committee shall consider the following questions.

  - a. Are the senior researchers charged with instruction and heading the research selected in such a manner that the quality of the programme and supervision can be guaranteed?
  - b. Has the research school arranged the selection procedure of senior researchers in such a

- way as to achieve a balanced ratio between male and female senior researchers?
- c. Does the research school have an adequate policy for appointing guest researchers and guest instructors and have such persons worked in the relevant research groups in the past four years?
  - d. Has the research school set up an adequate system of internal quality assurance for its training and supervision?
5. The ideal size of the research school is determined by subject-related, programme-related, staff-related and organisational considerations, financing options, potential numbers of research and teaching assistants, and the labour market demand for graduates. As a guideline, the research school should have a research and training capacity capable of accommodating no less than 40 students, which implies an annual average intake of ten persons. Smaller research schools may be accepted in exceptional cases, provided that there are good reasons for doing so.
- In determining the extent to which the research school meets this criterion, the Committee shall consider the following questions.
- a. Can the research school attract the required number of students and does it have sufficient financing to train them?
  - b. Is there evidence that the research school has enough capacity to train and supervise its students?
  - c. Has the research school considered the labour market prospects of its future graduates?
6. The research school interacts and co-ordinates adequately with relevant Bachelor's and/or Master's programmes.
7. The research school functions as an independent organisational unit with its own budgetary and managerial responsibilities, with the university or universities involved providing a level of financing for a period of at least four years that can be described as sufficient in view of the research school's planned capacity.
- The research school has been installed under faculty regulations (Sections 9.20, 9.22, first paragraph, WHW), governance and management regulations (Sections 9.21, 9.22, 2nd and 3rd paragraph, WHW) or the common arrangement of two or more universities (Section 9.23, WHW).
- Tasks and responsibilities within the school are delegated unambiguously and transparently to the bodies of the research school.
- In determining the extent to which the research school meets the criterion of an independent organisational unit, the Committee shall consider the following questions.
- a. Does the research school satisfy the requirements of the WHW with respect to a faculty research school or a research school maintained by multiple faculties, whether or not these belong to different universities?
  - b. Has/Have the dean/deans set out a research programme for a period of at least four years and is adoption of the annual research programme the responsibility of the research school's board?
  - c. Has the board of the research school been delegated sufficient powers with respect to the management of human resources and equipment?
  - d. Has/Have the university/the participating universities allocated sufficient financial resources for the day-to-day administration of the research school for a period of at least four years, given its planned capacity?
  - e. Are the management and the organisation of the research school adequately structured?
8. University research groups in the same university or in different universities that have a comparable or ancillary research mission may co-operate in a research school. The research school may also conclude long-term partnership agreements with research organisations belonging to NWO, TNO, KNAW or with other research organisations. The administrative

and financial responsibility for the research school lies with one or more universities; in the latter case, the participating universities bear primary responsibility for the research school. In determining the extent to which the research school meets this criterion, the Committee shall consider the following questions.

- a. Have the opportunities for intra-university and inter-university cooperation been adequately explored?
  - b. If multiple universities are involved, has the post of “secretary” been adequately arranged, together with the associated responsibilities?
  - c. Has enough effort been made to cooperate with suitable para-university institutes and other non-university organisations?
9. The research school accounts for its policy and results on an annual basis. The research school ensures that sufficient information is provided to evaluate its performance after six years.

## **Re-accreditation**

### *Article 7*

1. All provisions concerning accreditation set out in this protocol shall apply equally to re-accreditation.
2. When applying for re-accreditation, the research school shall submit an evaluation report by an independent international committee of experts which has assessed the quality of research and training at the research school over the past six years. This committee must have carried out its evaluation less than 3 years prior to the deadline for submitting the application.  
When separate SEP reports are submitted for different groups in the school, the application should explain precisely which parts of the separate reports are relevant for the school and how they relate to each other.

SEP evaluations should pay explicit attention to PhD programmes (as mentioned in SEP 2009-2015) and the connection of research programmes to a research school.

3. The Committee shall decide to grant or refuse re-accreditation pursuant to the criteria set out in Article 6 of this protocol and the evaluation report as referred to in Article 7.2.

In reaching its decision, the Committee shall in any event consider the following questions.

- a. Has the research school satisfied the high quality standards set for its education and training as well as for its research (the latter based on SEP evaluations), and are its productivity levels satisfactory in both cases?
- b. Has the school provided sufficient evidence of the success rate and the actual duration of its PhD tracks? Have policies been implemented to improve them? Has there been visible improvement in the success rate and/or duration?
- c. Has the research school implemented the policy intentions expressed at the time of its previous accreditation?
- d. Have any changes in policy been convincingly explained and clarified?
- e. Has the research school responded adequately to any comments or criticisms made by the Committee during the most recent accreditation procedure? To what extent has that led to changes in policy? If certain comments did not lead to changes in policy, what were the reasons?