

VLUHR QA

Self-assessment report

Targeted review

Brussels - December 2023



Preface

[VLUHR QA](#) is a Flemish quality assurance agency based in Brussels that promotes quality assurance and quality enhancement in higher education as an evaluation body and centre of expertise. VLUHR QA is the acronym for Flemish Higher Education Council - Quality Assurance¹. It is imbedded in the umbrella organisation of the Flemish Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences and Arts as an independent quality assurance agency.

VLUHR QA is governed by the VLUHR QA Board. Day-to-day operations are handled by a team consisting of the head of the organisation, three policy advisors and a staff member administration and finances. Currently, the VLUHR QA team consists of 4.2 FTE.

This self-assessment report (SAR) provides a targeted state of play of VLUHR QA's activities within the scope of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). VLUHR QA carries out the following activities within the scope of the ESG:

- [Programme assessment in Flanders](#)
- [European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes](#)

Currently, VLUHR QA focuses on programme assessments at registered institutions that do not have an institutional review, voluntary programme assessments at universities and universities of applied sciences and arts, as well as compulsory and voluntary programme assessments according to the *European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes* in Flanders and beyond.²

VLUHR QA has already been assessed two times by ENQA: in 2014 and in [2019](#). The two quality assurance agencies that merged into VLUHR QA were assessed separately for compliance with the ESG in 2009.

The forthcoming targeted review will address the agency's compliance with the ESG 2.1 and 3.4. The report of this review will be used by VLUHR QA to reapply for a membership of ENQA and a registration with EQAR. Even so, VLUHR QA is looking forward to share reflections on the chosen enhancement areas ESG 2.2 and 2.6. We are confident that this review will provide us with useful input to continue improving the quality of higher education in Flanders and to achieve our goals.

¹ Vlaamse universiteiten en Hogescholenraad - Kwaliteitszorg; Acronym: VLUHR KZ.

² VLUHR QA uses the term 'opleidingsbeoordeling' in Dutch. It is translated in English as 'programme assessment'. More recently, VLUHR QA has started using the term 'programme review'. Both terms can be considered interchangeable.

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1. Background

1.1. Development of the self-assessment report

This self-assessment report (SAR) was drafted as soon as the [Terms of Reference \(TOR\)](#) were agreed upon between ENQA, EQAR and VLUHR QA in September 2023.

This SAR is a collaborative effort by the VLUHR QA team and the VLUHR QA Board. It is the result of a thorough reflection on the functioning of VLUHR QA in specific areas. When a first draft of the SAR was prepared, several stakeholders gave their reflections on its content. These included the members of the [Advisory Council](#), the members of the [Appeals Committee](#), as well as the policy advisors on education and secretaries-general of the [Flemish Interuniversity Council \(VLIR\)](#) and the [Flemish Council of Universities of Applied Sciences and Arts \(VLHORA\)](#).

The final version of the SAR was approved by the QA Board on 27 November 2023. The SAR was submitted to ENQA on 1 December 2023.

The annexes to the SAR can be found [here](#).

1.2. History of VLUHR QA

VLUHR QA was established in 2013 as a result of the integration process of the quality assurance agencies of the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR) and the Flemish Council of Universities of Applied Sciences and Arts (VLHORA).

Originally, the organisation of programme assessments was entrusted by decree to VLIR in 1991 and to VLHORA in 2000.³ In 2009, the Flemish government asked for the quality assurance activities of VLIR and VLHORA to be brought together in a single new organisation, namely the Flemish Higher Education Council (VLUHR). In 2013, the integration of the two quality assurance units was completed and VLUHR QA was born. At the same time, this new organisation was given its own [governance structure](#), which had to provide the necessary guarantees of independence from its founding parties.

As a result of the legal changes in June 2015, an extended institutional review, carried out by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), was introduced as replacement for external programme assessments. Since then, universities and universities of applied sciences and arts have to demonstrate the quality of their existing programmes through their internal quality assurance systems, with no mandatory external programme reviews.

Consequently, the 2015 decision led to a drastic reduction in the number of programme assessments to be carried out by VLUHR QA. This reduced the staff size of VLUHR QA. Some members of staff believed that the accumulated expertise within VLUHR QA should not be lost, but at the service of supporting higher education quality assurance as an external partner. They ensured a relaunch of VLUHR QA with programme assessments on the one hand and support for institutions and programmes that do not need external programme assessment on the other hand. Institutions need to assure the involvement of external peers on their study programmes. Some of these institutions involve VLUHR QA in assuring this external view. These also rely on VLUHR QA's long-standing expertise in panel training and review design, among others.

In 2018, VLUHR QA was one of the pioneers in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in conducting programme assessments according to the framework of the European Approach for Quality

³ Since 1988 Belgium delegated its powers on education to its three communities: The German-, Flemish- and French-speaking community. A Flemish law is called a decree.

Assurance of Joint Programmes. Assessment through this system is mandatory for certain programmes in Flemish higher education and is recognised in several countries of the EHEA.

In 2019, due to legal changes, the criteria for programme assessments changed. The system with four assessment standards was replaced by an assessment framework based on eight quality features, which were a refinement of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG).

In 2022, VLUHR QA carried out the last decree-mandated programme assessments at universities and universities of applied sciences and arts, specifically the assessment of the professional Bachelor of Nursing programmes.

As mentioned above, VLUHR QA currently focuses on programme assessments at registered institutions that do not have an institutional review⁴, voluntary programme assessments at universities and university colleges, as well as compulsory and voluntary programme assessments according to the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes in Flanders and beyond. Since the last ENQA review (2019), VLUHR QA carried out a total of 32 reviews:

- 22 against the previous assessment framework,
- 3 with a European Approach procedure,
- 7 against the current assessment framework.⁵

A more extensive look back at the history of programme assessments in Flanders can be found [here](#).

1.3. Changes since the last full review (2019)

The agency review of VLUHR QA took place in Brussels from 10 - 12 June 2019. The final report of the panel was approved and published by ENQA on 19 September 2019. VLUHR QA then applied for a renewal of registration with EQAR. On 16 March 2020 EQAR approved the application by VLUHR QA for renewal of inclusion on the register.

At the time of the previous review, several changes were in the pipeline. Some of these changes, including the current manuals for programme assessment, were implemented quite soon after the panel's site visit and were already included in the renewal of registration with EQAR 9 months after the site visit.

Adjusted manuals

In September 2019, the Flemish Quality Assurance Framework changed. The changes for programme assessments are twofold. First, the four standards for programme assessments were replaced by eight quality features more closely aligned with the ESG (see chapter 2.1 of the SAR). Second, the assessment and judgement per standard was replaced by a holistic final judgement (see chapter 2.3.2).

The legislative changes and the suggestions and recommendations from the 2019 ENQA panel gave VLUHR QA the opportunity to revise their programme review manuals. Apart from making the legislative changes and following the recommendations, there was no intention to make bigger changes methodologically. However, VLUHR QA wanted to make the manuals more user-centred rather than procedure-centred (see chapter 2.3.1). In this way, the manuals would be more user-friendly for programme managers and panel members. VLUHR QA also revised the Manual for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes from the same perspective. The manuals became applicable from

⁴ These institutions are the registered institutions, public institutions for post-initial education, scientific research and scientific education, and the recognised faculties of Protestant theology.

⁵ An overview of all reviews can be found as annex 4.

January 2020. A modified manual was prepared specifically for the assessment of the Bachelor of Nursing programmes (see chapter 2.1).

The work of VLUHR QA in times of COVID-19 largely continued. The VLUHR QA team held regular online team meetings and consultations. During the lockdown, two reviews were conducted remotely. The site visits of the programme reviews in 2020 fortunately took place before the lockdown, during which reports were written and finalised. This meant that VLUHR QA had the opportunity to learn from others before conducting its programme assessments online. The manuals were updated with a notation on the website⁶ that allowed the programme assessment to be conducted online in specific circumstances.

Optimisation of operating structure

VLUHR QA is governed by the VLUHR QA Board, which meets four times a year. VLUHR QA is proud of the broad international composition of its Board, yet the board members sensed a need to include board members who have a stronger connection to Flemish Higher Education. The QA Board was therefore expanded from four to five members as of February 2021. One member did not continue their mandate and two new members joined the QA Board. These new members also had to meet the requirement of being independent from a Flemish higher education institution, to guarantee the independence of VLUHR QA towards the higher education institutions and umbrella organisation VLUHR. A former director of a Flemish university of applied sciences and a former director of education of a Flemish university joined the QA Board in February 2021. Both have a lot of experience with conducting reviews, both as a panel member and as a representative of programmes to be evaluated.

At the moment of the VLUHR QA Board renewal in March 2023, the former president⁷, had indicated not to renew his mandate after ten years of membership of the VLUHR QA Board, including six years as president. The remaining board members renewed their term of office, Mia Sas became president and Ton Kallenberg was welcomed as a new board member. The composition of the VLUHR QA Board from March 2023 - March 2025 is as follows:

- Mia Sas - President, Former Director of Odisee Hogeschool, Belgium (Flemish Community)
- Elfriede Heinen - Vice-President, Former Pedagogical Counsellor for the Federation of Catholic Higher Education Bruxelles, Belgium (French-speaking Community)
- Henning Dettleff - Member, Member of the Executive Board Education & Training, Bundesverband für Wohnen und Stadtentwicklung Berlin, Germany
- Ton Kallenberg - Member, Rector Jac. P. Thyse College, Castricum, The Netherlands
- Cis Van Den Bogaert - Member, Chair of the VLUHR QA Advisory Council, Honorary Head of Department of Education Antwerp University, Belgium (Flemish Community)

The VLUHR QA team used to operate as a self-steering team. However, team members felt the need for a 'primus inter pares' to manage the team. At its meeting on 14 October 2021, the QA Board decided that the VLUHR QA team needed a manager. In January 2022, Patrick Van den Bosch was appointed head of VLUHR QA.

Over the past period, stakeholder engagement has been an aspect that VLUHR QA has been working on. In the VLUHR QA Advisory Council, stakeholders discuss various topics such as the level of

⁶ This notation was added to the manuals: 'During a programme review organised by VLUHR QA, an independent panel of experts interviews the stakeholders of the programme. Normally, these interviews take place during an on campus visit. If a this is not possible due to COVID-19 measures taken by governments and/or institutions, the on campus visit can be replaced by an online visit, where the panel interviews the stakeholders of the programme to assess the programme. The combination of an on campus and online visit is also possible.'

⁷ Petter Aaslestad is emeritus professor of Literature NTNU (Trondheim), former chairman of NOKUT and former president Forskerforbundet, Norway

satisfaction regarding the programme reviews carried out and current trends and evolutions in Flemish and European higher education. This Advisory Council was originally composed of a representative of the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR), a representative of the Flemish Universities of Applied Sciences and Arts Council (VLHORA) and a representative of the Flemish Student Union (VVS). In this way, VLUHR QA involved all its main stakeholders. Nevertheless, the ENQA peer review recommended to VLUHR QA an even stronger embedding of different stakeholders in its governance structure. VLUHR QA therefore opts for extensive involvement of a wider range of stakeholders in its Advisory Council.

In recent years, thorough consideration has been given to a more efficient way of engaging stakeholders.⁸ An extended Advisory Council has therefore been operational since autumn 2023. It has been given a role in determining thematic analyses and the workings of the centre of expertise. The Advisory Council consists of:

- A quality assurance representative from the universities
- A quality assurance representative from the universities of applied sciences and arts
- An educational representative from the universities
- An educational representative from the universities of applied sciences and arts
- A representative from the registered institutions
- Two representatives from the Flemish Students Union (VVS)
- A representative from the Flemish Government, Department of Education and Training
- Two representatives from the professional field
- A member of the VLUHR QA Board (chairperson)
- A policy advisor from VLUHR QA

In addition to the Advisory Council, VLUHR QA has consultations four times a year with the two secretaries-general of the umbrella organisations 'VLIR' and 'Vlaamse Hogescholenraad' and an annual exchange with NVAO.

Policy plan 2023-2027

VLUHR QA works with five-year policy plans.⁹ The previous policy plan was in effect from 2018-2022. The current policy plan runs from 2023 till 2027. In preparation, VLUHR QA kicked off with an online two-day policy event in October 2020. During these two days, the VLUHR QA Board had inspiring discussions with various stakeholders about, among other things, the role of VLUHR QA in the Flemish higher education landscape, its missions, its relationship with other stakeholders, its organisational structure, and its financial impact. The discussions provided a basis for inspiration for the drafting of the policy plan. In the following meetings in autumn 2020 and spring 2021, the QA Board made an evaluation of the realisations of the policy plan 2018-2022 on the one hand and, on the other hand, initiated reflection on the current mission, vision and strategic objectives and they also set the ambition level of the policy plan. Drafting the policy plan was thus a moment of reflection for the team and the members of the VLUHR QA Board, which gave time to reflect on the achievements of the past and look ahead.

VLUHR QA's [mission and vision](#) were slightly updated. The adjusted mission and vision are more in line with the identity of VLUHR QA as an internationally oriented quality assurance agency that functions as an evaluation body and centre of expertise for the benefit of Flemish higher education. The focus on VLUHR QA as a centre of expertise was less present in the previous mission and vision.

⁸ Stakeholder engagement has often been a topic of discussion in VLUHR QA Board meetings. It was also one of the main topics during the ENQA progress visit. With the students, this theme was discussed annually. After all, student representatives prefer not to be part of the VLUHR QA Board. They indicate that their involvement is more apparent in the Advisory Council in which they have two mandates since autumn 2023. Finally, stakeholder engagement received ample attention in staff mobilities with other QA agencies.

⁹ The current policy plan is in annex 3.

The mission and vision were translated into strategic goals and year action plans:

SG 1 - VLUHR QA uses its knowledge, expertise and experience to provide leading and innovative solutions to universities and universities of applied sciences in order to respond to quality assurance trends and challenges.

SG 2 - VLUHR QA is committed to long-term and recurrent collaborations with universities, universities of applied sciences and arts and other players in the higher education field in order to create and perpetuate sustainable partnerships.

SG 3 - VLUHR QA is a player with authoritative say in the field and is committed to knowledge sharing and exchange with partners and stakeholders.

SG 4 - To further develop its role as a centre of expertise, VLUHR QA expands its international network, shapes international cooperation in order to disseminate international knowledge and experience in Flanders.

SG 5 - VLUHR QA strives for operational efficiency and an open and transparent organisational culture where employees assume responsibilities and are given room to develop further as professionals.

In the meantime, these objectives have led to a strengthened presence of VLUHR QA in the international forum, including membership of the ENQA Board¹⁰ and a reinforced professionalisation and appreciation policy for employees. In addition, VLUHR QA is putting stronger emphasis on external communication through its website and newsletter.

The policy plan focuses on all [VLUHR QA's activities](#). In addition to conducting programme reviews, VLUHR QA also carries out some activities outside the scope of the ESG. As explained in chapter 1.2, many higher education institutions in Flanders are no longer subject to programme review, as they opted for an institutional evaluation by the NVAO. For these institutions, VLUHR QA can provide support in strengthening their QA at institutional level, or by carrying out (parts of) their internal programme review procedures as an external partner. These consultancy activities are not new, although they have gained importance in recent years. The activities are clearly separated from VLUHR QA's regular activities within the scope of the ESG. This clear separation was confirmed by the panel in the previous external review of VLUHR QA.

¹⁰ A list of international activities in in annex 5.

2. Focus areas

2.1. ESG Standard ‘2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance’

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

2.1.1. Introduction

Since the previous agency review, VLUHR QA programme assessments are conducted within three different frameworks, namely (1) the previous Flemish framework based on four general quality standards, (2) the current Flemish framework using the eight quality features as review principles and (3) the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. The current Flemish framework came into force in 2019, after which the old system was phased out and only served as the basis for reviews for a specific dossier.

2.1.2. Mapping grid

The table below shows a mapping of the three frameworks used by VLUHR QA in relation to the ESG Part 1. This mapping is explained in the following paragraphs.

ESG Part 1	Previous FL. Assessment framework	Current FL. Assessment framework	European Approach
1.1 Policy for Quality Assurance	S2, S4	*11	S9, S1
1.2 Design and approval of programmes	S1, S2	QF 1, QF 2,	S2.1, S2.3, S3
1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	S2, S3	QF 3, QF 5, QF 6	S5
1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification	S2, S3	QF 4, QF 7	S4
1.5 Teaching staff	S2	QF 3,	S7
1.6 Learning resources and student support	S2	QF 4	S6, S7
1.7 Information management	S1, S2, S3, S4	QF 7, QF 8	S1-9
1.8 Public information	S1, S2, S3, S4	QF 7, QF 8	S8
1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	S1, S2, S3, S4	QF 1-8	S1-9
1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance	S2, S4	QF 1-8	S1-9

¹¹ In addition: “a programme ensures the involvement of internal and external stakeholders on the one hand and external and independent peers and experts on the other hand, in a continuous pursuit of quality development”, see below.

2.1.3. Previous Flemish Framework

The previous Flemish framework was in force from 2015 to 2020. The framework focused on four quality standards, to which a panel assessed each standard on a two-point scale: satisfactory or unsatisfactory.

- Standard 1 - Targeted outcome level
- Standard 2 - Educational learning environment
- Standard 3 - Outcome level achieved
- Standard 4 - Structure and organisation of internal quality assurance

The fourth standard applied only to programmes at institutions not subject to institutional review.

Regarding the application of this framework, the previous ENQA review panel formulated a recommendation: *‘For the assessment procedures in Flemish higher education VLUHR QA should make sure that all the elements covered by the ESG Part 1 are analysed in the review reports. This could be done either by further detalisation of the standards or by ensuring guidance to the review panels’.*

VLUHR QA has taken this recommendation to heart. Consideration was given within the team to what would be the most efficient way to address this recommendation, bearing in mind that, given the new legal requirements from September 2019, this framework would phase out.

Given that all programmes were, at least, already working on their SAR, further detailing the standards was not an option. VLUHR QA thus committed to providing additional guidance to the review panels: as for any other assessment, panel members are trained by VLUHR QA. During this training, the ESG are explained and the link between the ESG and VLUHR QA’s assessment framework was made clear. During the evaluation process and during reporting, extra attention was paid to the implementation of the ENQA panel’s recommendation to ensure that ESG Part 1 was adequately covered in all reports.

After 2020, the framework was applied in one specific case, namely the assessment of the Bachelor of Nursing. The Flemish government decided in September 2015, following European directive 2005/36/EC-2013/55/EU on regulated professions, to convert the Bachelor of Nursing at all Flemish universities of applied sciences from a three-year programme of 180 credits to a generic four-year programme of 240 credits. As a follow-up on these changes, the Flemish government decided that the reformed bachelor’s programmes in nursing had to undergo a programme review in the 2021-2022 academic year. It also decided that this review should be carried out within the framework applicable before 1 September 2019.

The programme reviews of the Bachelor of Nursing involved a total of twelve programmes. At the time these nursing programme reviews started, VLUHR QA was already working with the current manual for programme review (within the current framework), which is more fit for purpose. Because the old assessment criteria from the previous Flemish framework (2015) were still in force on these programme reviews, a modified manual was created to combine the old assessment criteria with the current, more suitable VLUHR QA methodology.¹²

To enable VLUHR QA to fully comply with the ENQA panel’s recommendations, VLUHR QA guaranteed through its regular working method that ESG Part 1 is fully covered in all reviews. To this end, in the information meeting that was held in early January 2020 for the relevant programmes on the expectations regarding the SARs, additional attention was given to ESG Part 1. Subsequently, VLUHR QA organised a separate information meeting for each programme at the programme location or, in case of COVID-19 related restrictions, online.

¹² <https://www.kwaliteitszorg.vluhr.be/files/Handleiding-opleidingsbeoordeling-Verpleegkunde.pdf>. (Dutch)

Panel training is a regular part of panel preparation. During the preparation of the panels involved in the reviews of the nursing programmes, explicit attention was paid to the aspects identified by the 2019 ENQA panel in its recommendation. The panels were made familiar with the ESG and its translation into the Flemish assessment framework. Besides focusing on the translation of the ESG into the assessment framework, attention is also paid to the institutions' quality assurance policies. During the site visit, the project manager of VLUHR QA ensures the panel takes all standards into account when preparing the questions for each interview. At the end of the site visit, each panel member fills in an assessment form that is structured according to the standards. This helps ensure that they are covered in each report. In the report template, a list of elements that should at least be addressed, was created. For example, attention is given to the procedure for design and internal approval of programmes and the topics of admission, progression and certification are covered in a more detailed way.

2.1.4. Current Flemish assessment Framework

Due to the aforementioned changes in legislation in September 2019 (see chapter 1.2), VLUHR QA was already able to include the ENQA panel recommendation in the adjusted VLUHR QA Manual for Programme Review.

In our current system, the quality of a programme is demonstrated by eight quality features. For each programme whose quality is judged as satisfactory, the presence of these features is guaranteed:

1. The programme's learning outcomes constitute a transparent and programme-specific interpretation of the international requirements regarding level, content, and orientation.
2. The programme's curriculum ties in with the most recent developments in the discipline, takes account of the developments in the professional field, and is relevant to society.
3. The staff allocated to the programme provide the students with optimum opportunities for achieving the learning outcomes.
4. The programme offers the students adequate and easily accessible services, facilities, and counselling.
5. The teaching and learning environment encourages the students to play an active role in the learning process and fosters smooth study progress.
6. The assessment of students reflects the learning process and concretises the intended learning outcomes.
7. The programme provides comprehensive and readable information on all stages of study.
8. Information regarding the quality of the programme is publicly accessible.

In addition, a programme ensures the involvement of internal and external stakeholders on the one hand and external and independent peers and experts on the other hand, in a continuous pursuit of quality development. If applicable, the programme must also comply with relevant regulations with respect to the admission of graduates to corresponding posts or professions.

The eight quality features mentioned above are mandated by Flemish decree¹³ and form the basis for accreditation by the NVAO. They serve as markers of a high-quality higher education programme and are more closely aligned with the ESG (2015) than the previous four quality standards. This is demonstrated by the fact that the quality features are:

- more student-centred with a focus on the student's active role in their learning process,
- with a stronger emphasis on the involvement of external stakeholders in quality assurance,
- with attention to the alignment between learning outcomes, curriculum (design), and the learning environment,

¹³ Codex Hoger Onderwijs, Art. II.170/1, see: <https://data-onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/edulex/document.aspx?docid=14650>.

- with explicit consideration of information management and public information.

Preparations for this adjusted manual had started at the time of the previous ENQA panel's visit and were implemented during the summer of 2019. They are in place since 1 January 2020. VLUHR QA ensures that during each review process it can be guaranteed that ESG Part 1 is covered in all aspects through an explicit consideration of the eight quality features in every programme review and report (see also 2.3.2 reporting) and by the fact that the VLUHR QA Board reads and approves all reports (see below).

We provide the programme management of each programme with guidelines for drafting the SAR¹⁴ at the start of the process. In addition, each panel is given a training before they carry out a programme assessment. During this training, there is a specific focus on the ESG and how they are translated into the Flemish assessment framework. During the site visit, the project manager of VLUHR QA ensures the panel takes all eight quality features into account when preparing the questions for each interview. At the end of the site visit, each panel member fills in an assessment form¹⁵ that is structured according to the eight quality features. This helps ensure that they are covered in each report.

The VLUHR QA Board has been approving all reports since the recommendation of the previous ENQA agency review (see also 2.3.2 reporting). To this end, the VLUHR QA Board uses a conformity check¹⁶ to ensure that all quality features are covered in each report. After publication of the first report, the VLUHR QA Board found that more attention was needed for QF 7 and 8 in the reports, which was taken up immediately. In autumn 2023, we made an analysis of the extent to which each quality feature is present in each report. The results can be read in our [thematic analysis on programme reviews in Flanders, VLUHR QA, Brussels 2023, p 10-12](#).

2.1.5. European Approach Framework

The assessment framework for joint programmes according to the European Approach has been used by VLUHR QA since 2018. To ensure compliance with ESG Part 1, VLUHR QA has deliberately opted to implement true European Approaches, meaning that no additional assessment criteria are added to the framework adopted in Yerevan in 2015.

For each standard¹⁷, the panel gives a substantiated opinion according to a three-point scale: fully compliant, partially compliant or non-compliant. The panel must make clear how it reaches its opinion, taking the standards into account. If the review results in a formal outcome, the panel should make a recommendation for the accreditation decision. The conclusions and recommendations should pay particular attention to the distinctive features of the joint programme.

2.1.6. Critical self-reflection

The quality features of the current framework align strongly with the ESG, making it more evident to fully cover ESG Part 1. Based on the ENQA panel's feedback, from autumn 2019, assessments that were still running within the old framework also paid extra attention to covering ESG Part 1 during training sessions, site visits and in reports.

The current assessment framework stipulates that quality features are not standards to be assessed separately, but are included in the assessment from a holistic perspective. As a result, the extent to which each of the quality features is comprehensively covered varies somewhat from one assessment

¹⁴ The guidelines can be found as annex 6.

¹⁵ The assessments forms can be found as annex 7 and 8.

¹⁶ The conformity check can be found as annex 12.

¹⁷ The standards can be found in the European Approach manual p. 7-9 (see annex 2).

to another. However, an analysis of the extent to which each feature is present in each report shows that they are consistently covered.

2.2. ESG Standard ‘3.4 Thematic analysis’

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

In this chapter, we describe on the one hand our search for embedding thematic analyses in our agency (2.2.1). Then we dive into the different thematic analyses we carried out since the last agency review (2.2.2). VLUHR QA considers it an achievement that, within our small self-funded agency, we managed to find a way of dealing with thematic analyses, supported by VLUHR QA’s stakeholders.

2.2.1. Renewed focus on thematic analysis

The previous agency review panel provided VLUHR QA with recommendations on reinforcing thematic analysis:

1. VLUHR QA should actively engage in discussions with the higher education stakeholders other than higher education institutions to ensure that VLUHR QA has an active role in conducting the upcoming comparative and thematic analyses.
2. VLUHR QA should identify the areas for thematic analysis that would be of interest for the higher education stakeholders.
3. VLUHR QA should use the results of the thematic analysis in order to improve the quality assurance processes on institutional and national level.

Since the 2019 ENQA agency review, VLUHR QA committed itself to a stronger focus on the structural execution of thematic analyses. The VLUHR QA team and board have been looking for a balanced way of investing resources in thematic analysis, that are useful for both VLUHR QA and its stakeholders.

VLUHR QA was aware that the aspect of thematic analysis was less present in its operations. Before 2015, programme reviews were - for 24 years - organised in clusters and each review report contained a content comparison of similar programmes. In this way, conducting thematic analyses was partly embedded in a structural way. After 2015, this was no longer structurally embedded.

In the past, systematically analysing and disseminating the information generated by VLUHR QA was not a priority for our agency. The reason was by no means a lack of interest, but rather a search for balance to make best use of the organisation’s resources.

At the time of the ENQA site visit, it was discussed that the Flemish government would conduct comparative and thematic analyses from September 2019. VLUHR QA and the Flemish higher education institutions would have liked VLUHR QA to be involved in this analysis. Therefore, the panel recommended that “VLUHR QA should actively engage in discussions with the higher education stakeholders other than higher education institutions to ensure that VLUHR QA has an active role in conducting the upcoming comparative and thematic analyses”. Shortly after the site visit, the HEIs reaffirmed that they wanted VLUHR QA’s involvement. However, since the government did not provide funds for this, VLUHR QA could not do so. Instead, this role was taken up by the NVAO, which is a government-funded accreditation organisation.

Looking for a tailor-made focus for VLUHR QA

Immediately after the agency review, the VLUHR QA Board put thematic analysis high on the agency’s agenda. The QA Board explored ways to deal with it at their October 2019 meeting.¹⁸ In early 2020, during the aforementioned two-day kick-off for the new policy plan (see chapter 1.3), the QA Board

¹⁸ The VLUHR QA Board reflected at its meeting in October 2019 on possibilities in working together with other QA agencies or research institutes. Even so, the Board reflected on how narrow or broad standard 3.4. can be interpreted. The Board pointed out that they find it useful and relevant to broaden the scope of thematic analyses (e.g. with regard to our activity on domain specific learning outcomes) The Board considered it nevertheless important that the topics for thematic analysis would have a link with the ESG.

discussed various options on thematic analysis with VLUHR QA's stakeholders. After careful discussion, the QA Board asked to prioritise topics for thematic analysis based on recurrence, embeddedness in daily operations, visibility, impact, and time investment. The VLUHR QA Board expressed its belief that conducting thematic analyses and disseminating their results can contribute to the (international) profiling of VLUHR QA and provide an opportunity to organise seminars. This was further refined at the QA Board meeting in October 2020 and led to a concrete proposal on the March 2021 QA Board meeting.

In March 2021, VLUHR QA decided that it wanted to focus on two categories of analyses. On the one hand, analyses that derive directly from information from our programme assessment reports, and on the other hand, analyses that also require information other than the data available to VLUHR QA based on its own work (such as institutional review reports and data provided by programmes). It was also an obvious choice for VLUHR QA to identify 'thematic analysis' as one of the topics for the ENQA progress visit in April 2022.

VLUHR QA foresaw three thematic analyses from the first category, namely on the Bachelor of Nursing, the Flemish programme reviews and the 'European Approach'. An analysis of the nursing programmes was planned once all final review reports would be published by summer 2022. The analysis of the Flemish programme assessment was planned for 2023, when at least five programmes would be evaluated through this recently implemented holistic review system. The analysis of the 'European Approach' was planned for early 2024, when three programmes would be evaluated through this framework.

To ensure structural embedding of thematic analysis in VLUHR QA's daily work, VLUHR QA's 2023-2027 policy plan paid ample attention to conducting thematic analyses within VLUHR QA's role as expertise centre. Within this expertise centre, the Flemish universities and universities of applied sciences and arts pay an annual contribution from 2023 onwards to cover staff costs for the annual thematic analysis.

The 2023-2027 policy plan allows stakeholders to submit proposals for thematic analysis through the Advisory Council. These proposals will then be submitted to the VLUHR QA Board for decision. At the Advisory Council meeting early 2024, proposals for thematic analysis will be discussed. In doing so, VLUHR QA ensures that the chosen areas for thematic analysis are of interest to higher education stakeholders. The next thematic analysis will be published in autumn 2024. Given that the previous thematic analyses are of the first category, we consider it realistic that this thematic analysis will be of the second category.

Visibility and impact

As requested by the VLUHR QA Board, VLUHR QA aims to disseminate the results of its thematic analyses to a wider audience. VLUHR QA does this through its newsletter, social media and the publication of news items on its website.

VLUHR QA is also looking at the Flemish Learning Network for Educational Developers ([LNO²](#)) when mapping out possible thematic analyses. VLUHR QA actively supports the workings of this network and sees opportunities to set up thematic analyses with them in the future, as all universities, universities of applied sciences and arts, and some registered institutions are represented in this network.

The dissemination method is always tailored to the relevant thematic analysis. To strengthen the impact of the thematic analysis on the Bachelor of Nursing, VLUHR QA organised a seminar with representatives of the relevant programmes and panels involved with the programme reviews (see chapter 2.2.2.). The thematic analysis programme assessments will then be the subject of exchange between the various institutions involved in the analysis, while the thematic analysis European Approach will be used for information sharing at various European forums on the one hand and with the Flemish HEI offering joint programmes on the other.

In the coming period, we also want to explore with the Advisory Council what analyses are needed of the type that also require information other than the data that VLUHR QA has on the basis of its own work. With this, we also want to try to strengthen our impact towards a broader target group.

2.2.2. Thematic analyses

Although strategic reflections took place in the period autumn 2019 - spring 2022, VLUHR QA carried out analyses in practice. The insights gained were disseminated.

In autumn 2019, a paper was published on VLUHR QA's experiences with the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint programmes. This article was intended as a reflection paper for the Flemish HEI, and it also formed the basis for a presentation at the 2019 EQAF conference.

[A First Exploration of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes](#), Patrick Van den Bosch & Roel Vande Winkel, Berlin, 2019.

To complete the work according to the framework for programme assessments in force from 2015 to 2020, a brief analysis was prepared. The analysis of the scores of all programme assessments focused not only on the actual data, but also contained a brief reflection on why some programmes scored insufficiently on certain standards.

[Programme Review Analysis 2015 - 2020](#), VLUHR QA, Brussels 2020.

In anticipation of a planned conference that could not take place during the COVID-19 period, a publication was made on co-certification and the European Approach in both parts of Belgium. This is not a thematic analysis, but rather a state of play in Flanders and French-speaking Belgium. With this, we wanted to look together at the similarities and differences in the north and south of Belgium, as the focus in Flanders regarding assessment and accreditation is often more on the Netherlands.

[Codiplômation et assurance qualité dans l'enseignement supérieur en Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles et en Flandre](#), Yoneko Nurtantio (AEQES), Cosmina Ghebaur (ARES) & Patrick Van den Bosch (VLUHR QA), Brussels, 2021.

Following the twelve nursing programme reviews, VLUHR QA conducted a thematic analysis of the review reports involved. Seven themes emerged strongly in all the reports and formed the core of the analysis. The analysis of these themes was then presented to some former panel members who participated in the programme assessments. VLUHR QA then organised a seminar in which representatives of all Flemish nursing programmes participated. During this seminar, the findings were presented and then discussed by an expert panel consisting of a representative sample of former panel members of the programme assessments. Afterwards, the programme representatives exchanged experiences and good practices. Based on the additional insights from this seminar, the thematic analysis was finalised and published. The results were taken up by a working group of the universities of applied sciences and will be discussed in their upcoming meeting with the relevant government.

[Thematische analyse Verpleegkunde](#), VLUHR QA, Brussels 2023 (Dutch).

[Thematic analysis Nursing: short summary \(English\)](#).

VLUHR QA chose to carry out a thematic analysis of the review reports it published within the framework of the current quality assurance system in Flanders. A total of seven assessment reports were published between May 2021 and May 2023. VLUHR QA tried to answer two broad research questions with this analysis.¹⁹ This allowed VLUHR QA to draw not only substantive but also methodological conclusions. VLUHR QA intends to share these insights with other agencies. Moreover, in spring 2024, VLUHR QA aims to bring together registered institutions to reflect on the substantive conclusions of this thematic analysis.

[Thematische analyse Opleidingsbeoordelingen, VLUHR QA, Brussels 2023 \(Dutch\).](#)

[Thematic analysis programme review, VLUHR QA, Brussels 2023 \(English\).](#)

Following the first three evaluations undertaken by VLUHR QA in the framework of the 'European Approach', a thematic analysis is in progress and will be published early in 2024. In the past and also in the future, VLUHR QA will continue to share its experiences regarding the European Approach, both in Flanders and beyond.²⁰

[Thematic analysis European Approach, VLUHR QA, Brussels 2024 \(English\).](#)

There are several proposals within the team for the subject of the next thematic analysis. The proposals will be discussed with the Advisory Council early 2024. The Advisory Council will also be asked to make its own suggestions, which will be submitted to the VLUHR QA Board.

2.2.3. Critical self-reflection

Thematic analyses have been placed high on VLUHR QA's agenda following the previous ENQA agency review. For a small organisation like VLUHR QA, it is quite a challenge to conduct thematic analyses within the available budgets and time. In this regard, several paths for thematic analyses were discussed. We believe that the thematic analyses carried out should, on the one hand, generate relevant impact for strengthening educational quality and, on the other hand, contribute to the profiling of VLUHR QA, given the limited financial resources to carry out thematic analyses.

It took some time for VLUHR QA to find its way in this. Thanks to a small financial contribution from the Flemish higher education institutions, VLUHR QA can realise its objectives. We hope and trust that the Advisory Council can play an important role in determining topics of thematic analysis in this regard. For the time being, we conducted thematic analyses category 1. We expect to conduct more category 2 thematic analyses in the future. This is partly due to the input from the Advisory Council and partly because the number of programme reviews is limited, which also limits the number of category 1 analyses.

¹⁹ 1. In what ways is the VLUHR QA Manual on Programme Assessment (2020) being put into practice? How are the methods and practices described in the manual applied to the context of a specific programme? What evidence do the reports provide to reach a holistic final judgement?

2. Can common elements be discerned in the assessment reports? Are there certain good practices and/or areas for improvement that link the different programmes and institutions?

²⁰ The list of international activities can be found as annex 5.

2.3. Selected enhancement areas

The targeted review offers the opportunity to select enhancement areas in addition to the ESG to be assessed by the ENQA panel. VLUHR QA would like to reflect with the panel and with stakeholders on how VLUHR QA implements the follow-up on programme reviews and how VLUHR QA reports the results of its reviews.

2.3.1. ESG Standard ‘2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose’

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

Manual Programme Review

The current manual for programme review in Flemish higher education is in use since January 2020. As indicated in chapter 1.3, the manual was adapted to incorporate both legal changes and the recommendations of the previous panel. Stakeholders were involved in the preparation of this adapted manual through the Advisory Council. Thus, a meeting was organised in spring 2019 where all universities and universities of applied sciences and arts were represented.

VLUHR QA itself noted that in the previous manual, certain procedures were modelled on the system of cluster assessments, especially regarding the composition of the panel. However, since cluster assessments had not existed since 2015, a procedural simplification was needed. In addition, VLUHR QA felt that the previous manual was written from the perspective of the quality assurance agency rather than that of the user: panels and programmes. Therefore, efforts were made to design the current manual more logically for the user: user-centred instead of procedure-centred.

The overall structure of the manual follows the main phases of the review process: the preparatory phase (chapter 1), writing the self-evaluation report (chapter 2), selecting the review panel (chapter 3), followed by the review by the panel, their reporting, and the publication of the report (chapter 4). In the thematic analysis VLUHR QA made on the recent programme reviews, evidence confirms that current approach appears to be fit for purpose.²¹

Content was also optimised:

- It was noted that some programmes did not always clearly communicate the official status of the different pathways they offer within a programme. VLUHR QA therefore asks for a written application from the institution requesting a review of their programme, clearly stating which programmes and pathways are the subject of the review.²²
- In the training of panel members, the roles of the panel members, the panel chair and the project manager are discussed. These roles are now also explicitly included in the manual.
- The manual now also indicates that a co-creative interview is added during the site visit. In this interview, the panel discusses the findings with the programme managers at the end of the site visit, engaging in a constructive dialogue.
- The current manual introduced some new annexes (see below).
- Follow-up was formally introduced as part of the programme review.

²¹ [Thematic analysis programme assessments, VLUHR QA, Brussels 2023.](#)

²² The application form is on our website: <https://www.qualityassurance.vluhr.be/files/Docs/Annex-1-Application-for-the-review.docx>.
The form was adjusted by decision of the VLUHR QA Board on 4 October 2023.

Manual European Approach

The previous VLUHR QA Manual for the European Approach for External Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes was approved by the QA Board in June 2018. This manual was used for a pilot evaluation with the European Approach framework.

This manual was slightly modified based on the first experiences with the European Approach, international exchange of expertise, and in the pursuit of uniformity in working methods with the Manual Programme Review. The revised manual came into force on 1 January 2020. A reflection on how VLUHR QA introduced the framework for the European approach is described in the article '[A first exploration of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes](#)'.²³

Continuous improvement

In addition to the manuals, VLUHR QA has an internal roadmap that details how the procedures described in the manuals are handled. The aspects relevant to external parties are published on the [website](#) as annexes to the manuals.

Over the past five years, some internal procedures have been tightened or supplemented based on insights from the team, the QA Board, and feedback from stakeholders. For example, VLUHR QA conducts an annual survey of panel members and programmes/institutions involved in programme reviews.²⁴ The needs of the mostly smaller registered institutions are sometimes different from those of universities and universities of applied sciences. VLUHR QA aims to respond to this.

Follow-up

The decision to introduce a follow-up procedure dates back to 2018-2019. At the time, this decision was not supported by all stakeholders: there was no tradition of follow-up and it was feared that it would create an unnecessary administrative burden.

The VLUHR QA team investigated different forms of follow-up common to QA agencies across the EHEA. In the end, the choice fell on a system very similar to the way ENQA organises a progress visit.

The 2019 ENQA panel recommended that the follow-up procedure be considered a mandatory part of the assessment procedure. In autumn 2019, VLUHR QA adapted its follow-up procedure. For example, where the previous manual for the European approach left the possibility for other QA agencies to take on the follow-up, VLUHR QA now takes this ownership. In the current manuals, the follow-up procedure is fully integrated into the assessment process.

It is a noteworthy observation that the institutions and programmes where VLUHR QA carries out programme assessments indicate, without exception, that they consider the concept of having a follow-up to be an added value of the programme assessment procedure of VLUHR QA. Of course, this can also be explained by the fact that the programmes that are now assessed by VLUHR QA consciously choose us as their QA agency, whereas in the past all programmes of all Flemish HEIs had to be assessed.

Follow-up visits take place three years after the initial site visit. VLUHR QA organises a follow-up in which the panel, as a critical friend, discusses developments since the site visit with the programme. The follow-up aims to contribute to promoting the quality culture within the programme. It is intended to stimulate the reflection of the programme on the panel's findings and recommendations.

²³ 'A first exploration of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes', Patrick Van den Bosch (VLUHR QA) & Roel Vande Winkel (KU Leuven, LUCA School of Arts), Brussels 2019.

²⁴ The results of the surveys can be found as annex 9 and 10.

The procedure also focuses on the improvement perspective, with the programme and the panel engaging in a co-creative dialogue.

VLUHR QA contacts the programme when the follow-up starts, preferably three years after the publication of the review report. How this is done is described in the elaboration of the follow-up procedure.²⁵

The programme provides relevant information in preparation for the follow-up visit, during which the programme management further explains which developments the programme has gone through since the visit.

During the follow-up interview, at least one member of the original panel talks to the programme. They are supported in this by VLUHR QA's project manager. In consultation with VLUHR QA and the programme, consideration can be given to possibly adding other stakeholders (lecturers, students, etc.) to the discussion or conducting several separate discussions. The follow-up interview is designed in a co-creative way.

After the follow-up interview, the panel member formulates their findings. Any further recommendations can also be given. The project manager writes minutes on this basis. After approval by the panel member, the minutes are sent to the programme, which can correct factual inaccuracies. After correction, the minutes are sent to the programme and the VLUHR QA Board. The QA Board can make suggestions and ask for additional information, clarification, and explanation.

In spring 2023, VLUHR QA started the practical elaboration of the follow-up procedure mentioned above. In September 2023, VLUHR QA contacted the three programmes eligible for a follow-up. The first follow-ups will take place in early spring 2024. These programmes are:

- Master of Arts in Transatlantical Affairs, College of Europe
- Research Master in Fluid Dynamics, von Karman Institute for Fluid Dynamics
- Master of Arts in Diplomacy and Global Governance - Master of Arts in Global Security and Strategy, Vesalius College

VLUHR QA has confidence in the methodology of this follow-up because it is very similar to the way ENQA organises a progress visit. Nevertheless, this is no guarantee of success given the different context in which VLUHR QA operates. At the time of submitting this SAR, we eagerly await the results of the first follow-up procedures.

We would like to discuss the results of these first follow-ups with all stakeholders during the site visit of the ENQA agency review: programme managers and panel members involved in follow-ups as well as VLUHR QA Board and team representatives. Does this contribute to the quality culture of the programme? Is the methodology fit for purpose? Is the administration sufficiently limited? How can we best shape future follow-ups?

2.3.2. ESG Standard '2.6 Reporting'

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

Figures and facts

VLUHR QA organised 32 programme reviews over the course of five years. The distribution of assessments across these years varied, with the lowest number of reports published in 2021 (4 reports) and the highest number in 2022 (15 reports). Two-thirds of the assessment reports were written in

²⁵ The practical elaboration of the follow-up procedure can be found as annex 11.

Dutch and one-third in English. VLUHR QA conducted 22 reviews using the previous framework, 7 reviews within the current framework, and 3 programmes following the European Approach framework.

All reports are published on [our website](#).

A new style of reports

When introducing the adjusted manuals, VLUHR QA decided to extend this optimisation to the administrative framework of the reports. The introduction of the report was limited to those elements necessary according to the ESG and the Flemish accreditation framework. As a result, the introduction to the reports was limited to two pages, supplemented by four annexes: the CV of the panel members, the visit schedule, an overview of documents consulted, and the administrative details of the programme.

No further adjustments were made to the manual for the European Approach: the format of these reports has remained unchanged since the first review according to this framework.

For the nursing manual, agreements were made within the team in September 2021 to ensure uniformity of the reports on the one hand and to ensure that all ESG are fully present in the nursing reports on the other.

The reports according to the current Flemish framework gave room for new opportunities. The holistic assessment allowed the reports to be designed in different ways. VLUHR QA discussed this within the team, with the QA Board, the NVAO, and other stakeholders. An analysis of the reports shows that they are structured in the following ways:

- Reports that go through the eight quality features one by one ([Innocom](#), [Vesalius College '21](#), [Vesalius College '23](#))
- Reports that start incrementally from the panel's experiences through the scrutiny of the SAR and the site visit; travelogue ([Innocom](#), [Drama](#))
- Reports based on the panel's oral report at the end of the site visit ([Vesalius College '23](#), [VKI](#))
- Reports structured around recurring, overarching topics raised by the programme and/or the panel ([ETF](#), [FPTR](#))
- Reports based on themes raised by the programme itself ([Drama](#))

VLUHR QA aims to build customisation and flexibility into our reports in relation to the programme and the programme's ownership. Moreover, we want to safeguard consistency across all reports. VLUHR QA also strives to always maintain a balance between enhancement and accountability.

Surveys show that panel members and programme management are satisfied with the reports. Some panel members indicate a preference for a report structured according to the eight quality features, while others appreciate that the report can take the form of a holistic narrative.

In autumn 2023, VLUHR QA conducted an analysis of the extent to which each quality feature is present in each report. The results can be read in our [thematic analysis on programme reviews, VLUHR QA, Brussels 2023, p 10](#).

Below we outline the procedure according to which we work, as well as the role the VLUHR QA Board plays in the current procedures.

Procedure for programme reviews

After the site visit, the VLUHR QA project manager writes a report based on the self-evaluation and the panel members' findings and considerations, notes of the interviews and internal deliberations,

the oral report, and any additional information requested during the site visit for clarification. The report has a maximum of 20 pages, excluding the annexes.

The report contains a holistic and reasoned final review of the programme, as well as findings and considerations that support the substantiation of the judgment. It is reproducible and comprehensible, and clearly shows the elements and considerations on which the panel based its judgement. Whenever possible, the panel uses appealing and representative examples for this purpose. Recommendations and good practices are formulated as concretely as possible and summarised in a separate list at the end of each report.

If there are different tracks and/or locations, the report should demonstrate whether each variation of the programme meets the review principles. Subsequent programmes (e.g. bachelor-master) within one institution may be assessed in one report.

The report is presented to the panel members, discussed, and confirmed. After approval by the panel, the report is sent to the programme under embargo for feedback. The programme then has the opportunity to comment on the report, request correction of factual inaccuracies, and comment on the content. The programme's response is submitted to the review panel no later than three weeks after receipt of the report.

In practice, programme management's response has so far been quite brief in all cases. This is different from the past, when programmes responded extensively to the draft report. The reasons for this are twofold. In the then cluster assessments with assessment on a four-point scale, there was a certain competition between programmes. Both cluster assessment and the four-point scale are a thing of the past. In addition, the introduction of a co-creative dialogue at the end of each site visit has meant that programme managers do not read elements in the reports that surprise them.

The panel discusses the programme's response, after which it endorses the report. The panel also prepares a note explaining how it has addressed the programme's comments. The panel is autonomous in its decision on whether or not to take into account the comments from the programme. Factual errors are corrected in all cases. After approval by the panel, the report, and the explanatory note are sent to the programme under embargo.

Ownership of the QA Board

The VLUHR QA Board is given a more explicit role in ensuring that the reports meet the set requirements. This was a suggestion from the peer review panel: "VLUHR QA could revise the process for internal approval of panel reports to ensure that the review reports are read by the VLUHR QA Board before publishing or replace the foreword of the VLUHR QA Board by a more general introduction by VLUHR QA."

At least two members of the QA Board read each report before publication. The QA Board developed a form to scrutinise whether reports meet the criteria in the VLUHR QA manuals.²⁶ This allows the QA Board to request clarification if needed. However, the review panel retains ownership of the content of the report. After approval by the VLUHR QA Board, the report is published.

During the site visit, we are happy to discuss various topics related to our reports, such as structure, target audience, level of detail, the balance between findings and considerations, and the role of the QA Board in approving reports.

²⁶ The conformity check can be found as annex 12.

3. SWOT analysis

This SWOT covers the entire organisation and operation of VLUHR QA and goes beyond the standards that are the subject of this SAR. The opportunities and threats listed in this SWOT analysis are also addressed in VLUHR QA's 2023-2027 policy plan. They were translated into strategic objectives and concrete action plans.

Strengths

- An increasing number of assignments every year with an increasing amount of partners
- High satisfaction from and good relationship with partners
- Strong reputation in the higher education sector
- International embedding, innovative nature of assignments, taking on a pioneering role (e.g. European approach and applying other ways of quality assurance)
- Flexibility of staff
- Tailor-made procedures
- Broad expertise shifting from an operational role to a quality assurance expert role
- Solid and efficient organisational structure

Weaknesses

- A small team with high workload and peak load
- Little time and room to take up non-paid tasks
- Working on a contract basis with client per project makes working on long-term planning difficult
- Limited number of programme assessments (scope ESG)
- Communication of our services and results

Opportunities

- Taking a leading role in Flanders: consolidation and growth of the centre of expertise
- Meeting the demand of Flemish HEI for focus on expertise and knowledge sharing, conduct thematic analyses and qualitative research, disseminate international experiences and expertise
- Offer innovative services that respond to current needs and trends in the field (AI, academic integrity, micro-credentials...)
- Partnerships with higher education institutions (long-term and with mutual interest)

Threats

- Potential harsh competition with other agencies in a free market
- Fragmented expertise due to wide diversity of partners and stakeholders with different interests
- Potential loss of external view in sustainable and long-term assignments (outside the scope of the ESG).

4. Conclusions

Looking back over the past five years since the last ENQA review, we feel empowered as an organisation. We hope that this SAR demonstrates that, as a small organisation, VLUHR QA is able to deal flexibly with changing contexts in a competitive market. We believe that the reader of this SAR has gained an insight into some of the innovative initiatives we are undertaking, such as our user-centred manuals where customisation goes hand in hand with sound evaluation, finding ways to conduct thematic analyses, and the corresponding expansion of VLUHR QA as a centre of expertise for the benefit of the wider higher education community.

We have committed to strengthening ourselves internationally by disseminating the expertise acquired in Flemish higher education. We also tried to involve our external stakeholders more strongly. This way, we keep each other sharp to guarantee a quality culture, both in higher education and in our own operation as a self-regulating and self-managing agency that also wants to reflect this quality culture, especially when challenges come our way.

However, the customisation, innovation, and flexibility we demonstrate is also a crucial factor that enables us to function as a small player in a competitive market of quality assurance agencies.

We hope this SAR has provided insight into some specific areas of VLUHR QA's operation. Where further clarification is needed, we look forward to the ENQA panel's discussions with VLUHR QA and its stakeholders.

4.1. Glossary of Terms

AEQES	Agence pour l'Evaluation de la Qualité de l'Enseignement Supérieur, en Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles.
EA	European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes
ECTS	European Credit Transfer system
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQAF	European Quality Assurance Forum
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ESG	European Standards and guidelines for Quality assurance in higher education
EURASHE	European Association of Institutions in Higher Education
FQF	Flemish Qualifications Framework
FTE	Full Time Equivalent
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
IQA	Internal Quality Assurance
NVAO	Accreditation Organisation for the Netherlands and Flanders
QA	Quality Assurance
SAR	Self-assessment report
SWOT	Strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-threats
VLHORA	Flemish Council of Universities of Applied Sciences and Arts
VLIR	Flemish Interuniversity Council
VLUHR	Flemish Council for Higher Education
VLUHR QA	Flemish Council for Higher Education - Quality Assurance
VVS	Flemish Student Union

4.2. Annexes

All annexes to the SAR can be found in [this folder](#).

1. Manual Programme Review
2. Manual European Approach
3. Policy plan (Dutch)
4. Overview panel members per country
5. International activities since 2019
6. Guide for drawing up a SER
7. Assessment form panel member
8. Assessment form panel member (EA)
9. Survey institutions 2023 (Dutch)
10. Survey panels members (Dutch)
11. Follow-up procedure
12. Conformity check reports
13. Programme reviews in Flanders