

Self-assessment report

2019

External review for the reconfirmation of VLUHR QA as a full member
of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

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vluhr



VLUHR QA - SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT 2019

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1 Introduction

This self-assessment report (SAR) sets out the information and evidence that demonstrates how the Quality Assurance Unit of the Flemish Council for higher education (VLUHR QA) complies with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG). This report is the result of an intensive process carried out by VLUHR QA in preparation for its peer review for the reconfirmation of the agency's full membership of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

VLUHR QA has been operational since 1st January 2013. As an organisation, VLUHR QA is the result of an integration process of the former quality assurance units of VLHORA (Flemish Council of Universities of Applied Sciences and Arts) and VLIR (Flemish Interuniversity Council). Both units were full members of ENQA and were registered in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). VLUHR QA has proven its compliance with the former membership criteria c.q. ESG within two years of its merger. The full membership and the registration in EQAR were reconfirmed in 2015.

In the SAR that we wrote for the previous peer review (spring 2014), the following threats were identified in the SWOT analysis: "Higher education institutions in Flanders are pleading for an external quality assurance system, uniquely based on institutional accreditation, leaving out programme assessments. This would have a major impact on the role and functions of VLUHR QA. Therefore, VLUHR QA wants to raise its profile as a high quality assurance agency in order to stay an interesting partner for higher education institutions. Additionally, VLUHR QA aims to diversify its activities." It was expected that the quality assurance system in Flanders would have a gradual transition from programme assessments organised by VLUHR QA to institutional reviews by 2021 organised by the Accreditation Organisation for the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO). Therefore, VLUHR QA would have 7 years to prepare for its future role. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the spring of 2015, a decision was made to stop the programme assessments with immediate effect in favour of an institutional review.

The decree change of 2015 immediately led to a drastic reduction in the number of assessments for VLUHR QA. All universities and universities of applied sciences took part in an pilot institutional review and as a consequence the accreditation of their programmes were to be extended for another eight years based on the accreditation of the previous assessment round (2005-2013). This arrangement did not apply to new programmes, the programmes that had a reduced period of accreditation (improvement trajectory) and international joint programmes that are considered to be accredited in accordance with the conditions/requirements of a European funding programme, e.g. Erasmus Mundus. These programmes still needed an accreditation based on an assessment organised by VLUHR QA.

The method of programme assessments used by VLUHR QA broadly remained the same, except for a number of optimisations that are further explained in the SAR. VLUHR QA reported these changes to ENQA and EQAR in its Substantive Change Report. On the basis of this report, ENQA and EQAR concluded that the remaining assessments are carried out in line with VLUHR QA's existing methodology.

The impact on the organisation was more important. Almost all employees were immediately dismissed. However, universities and universities of applied sciences and arts unanimously stressed that the change in the system should not be seen as a depreciation of the staff's expertise. The heads of institutions believed in the capacities of the employees and therefore, most employees were recruited by Flemish higher education institutions (HEI).

Some employees thought that the expertise built up by VLUHR QA should be kept and deployed at the service of HEI's quality assurance to give support as an external partner. The HEI favoured the idea. The VLUHR Board followed this reasoning and decided that VLUHR QA should be composed of four employees to carry out both programme assessments and supporting projects. In that way, VLUHR QA got a staff with numerically sufficient critical mass again.

Right from the start of VLUHR QA's projects, an ethical and deontological approach was used to ensure that assessments and projects were clearly separated. Searching the perfect balance, the EQAR provisions became important guidelines.

Due to the change in VLUHR QA's size, some structural optimisations were necessary too. The size of the QA Board, for example, was changed and the Advisory Board was reshaped. In addition, this situation was used to optimise some processes. That way, the administrative burden has been limited.

As of 2015, the Flemish HEI had new quality assurance needs, due to the disappearance of most programme assessments. During a first phase, the institutions were looking for what it was they wanted and to what extent they would pursue their cooperation with VLUHR QA. After the pilot institutional reviews organised by NVAO, the new needs in the field of quality assurance for the institutions became clearer. VLUHR QA wanted to respond to this.

In preparation of the new quality assurance system that will start in September 2019, VLUHR QA contacted the universities and universities of applied sciences and arts and discussed the needs and expectations for a Flemish quality assurance agency in future. Apart from the need for individual demand driven cooperation, the institutions want to cooperate with VLUHR QA for the assessments of art programmes and assessments of joint programmes following the European approach. VLUHR QA used the discussion input to formulate its goals for the future which were presented to and accepted by the VLUHR Board in 2018. One aspect was the number of staff members. The increasing demand for different types and continuing cooperation between the HEI and VLUHR QA lead to a staff increase from 4 FTE to 4.6 FTE

Although the changes in the quality assurance system were unseemly rapid, VLUHR QA has once again taken a clear place in the changing landscape. On the one hand, VLUHR QA continues to work on thorough programme assessments. On the other hand, it has seized those changes as an opportunity to prepare VLUHR QA for the future.

The forthcoming review will address the agency's compliance with the ESG. The report of this review will be used by VLUHR QA to reapply for a full membership of ENQA and a registration with EQAR. VLUHR QA is looking forward to share ideas with a panel of international experts on the site. We are confident that this will provide us with useful input to continue improving our work and to achieve our goals.

2 Development of the self-assessment report

Flanders is a small region of a small country in Europe. Nevertheless, we note that even in our region the structures - although effective - sometimes are difficult to explain to those who are not fully familiar with them. Combined with the changes that took place in legislation on quality assurance in higher education in recent years, this makes writing a structured SAR a challenging exercise.

The SAR gave us the opportunity to draw up a status quo of where we currently stand. During the process preceding the writing of the SAR, procedures were tightened up, such as the introduction of a formal complaint procedure, the development of a follow-up procedure and an increased focus on thematic analysis.

This SAR is a collaborative effort by VLUHR QA staff and the QA Board. It results from a thorough reflection, starting in the spring of 2018, on the functioning of VLUHR QA. As VLUHR QA has a small number of staff, all contributed drafting the SAR. On a frequent basis the draft reports were submitted to the QA Board and discussed during a meeting on June 12th, 2018 and November 26th, 2018.

The SWOT analysis is developed in several sessions with the VLUHR QA staff and the QA Board, external stakeholders and partners like the Advisory Council, NVAO, VVS, VLIR and VLHORA.

The final version of the SAR was approved by the QA Board and presented to ENQA on the first of March 2019.

3 Higher education and quality assurance of higher education in the context of the agency

As one of the three Autonomous Communities of the Belgian federal state, the Flemish Community is responsible for education in Flanders. The Higher Education Codex¹ provides the legal framework for higher education in Flanders.

3.1. Higher Education in Flanders

Institutions

The Flemish Community defined two types of higher education institutions:

- Statutory registered institutions,
- Non-statutory registered institutions.

Statutory registered institutions

The five universities ('universiteiten') and the thirteen universities of applied sciences and arts ('hogescholen')², along with a number of institutes for post-initial education, the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit and the Faculteit voor Protestantse Godgeleerdheid, belong to the group of statutory registered institutions. These institutions are recognised by law and receive public funds, regardless of their private or public legal status and offer education to over 200,000 students in total. They cater for over 99% of higher education students in Flanders and Brussels. Both operate in the fields of scientific research or project-based scientific research and in the field of services to the community.

Non-statutory registered institutions

Other institutions can offer higher education programmes if they register with the Flemish Government. These are the non-statutory registered institutions. The registration procedure involves proving financial solvency and drawing up collaboration agreements with statutory registered institutions guaranteeing the continuity of a programme. Seven institutions³ are registered so far. These institutions do not receive funding from the Government. Together they enrol education to about 1,000 students.

¹ <https://data-onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/edulex/document.aspx?docid=14650#1087536> – chapter 8 and 9 (art. II.121 et seq.)

² List of Flemish Higher Education Institutions : <http://www.vluhr.be/p157>

³ Vesalius College, Inno.com, College of Europe, University of Kent, Continental Theological Seminary, Flanders Business School and von Karman Institute.

Study programmes

The structure of higher education in Flanders is defined by the Higher Education Codex and the Flemish Qualifications Framework⁴ (FQF). Five types of study programmes are distinguished:

- associate degree programmes (level 5 of the FQF)
- professional bachelor programmes (level 6)
- academic bachelor programmes (level 6)
- master programmes (level 7)
- doctoral programmes (level 8)

The FQF levels are congruent with the Dublin descriptors and the European Qualifications Framework.

An overview of the higher education structure is shown below:

EQF	Academic higher education	Professional higher education	Vocational higher education	ECTS
	Universities	Universities of applied sciences and arts (*)	Universities of applied sciences and arts	
5			Associate degrees	90-120
6	Bachelor (academic orientation)	Bachelor (professional orientation)		≥ 180
6		Advanced bachelor		≥ 60
7	Master			≥ 60
7	Advanced master			≥ 60
8	PhD			
	Post-graduate study programmes			

EQF: European Qualifications Framework, ECTS: European Credit Transfer System

(*) Professional and academic programmes in the field of Arts are organised by the Schools of Arts and are a separate entity within the universities of applied sciences and arts. The Hogere Zeevaartschool offers academic programmes in Nautical Sciences.

All accredited bachelor and master programmes are listed in the Higher Education Register⁵, which is jointly managed by the Flemish Administration for Higher Education and the Accreditation Organisation for the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO). Higher education institutions enjoy full autonomy in designing curricula but must take the requirements of the Higher Education Codex into account. The workload of programmes is measured in credits. One credit stands for 25 to 30 hours of workload. A full-time programme counts 60 credits per year.

The lion share of higher education programmes in Flanders is organised in Dutch and strict language regulations are in place. A maximum of 6% of the total initial bachelor's programmes may be organised in a language other than Dutch. For master's programmes, a maximum of 35% of the total initial Master programmes may be organised in a language other than Dutch. Every member of the teaching staff must have an adequate level of competence in the course language. Generally, a minimum level of C1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages is required.

⁴ <http://vlaamsekwalficatiestructuur.be/en/>

⁵ www.hogeronderwijsregister.be

3.2. Quality assurance in Flemish higher education

Evolution of the quality assurance system

Programme assessments 1991-2015

Since 1991, a system of independent peer reviews has been existing in Flanders at programme level, first for universities and later for universities of applied sciences and arts too. Each institution was required to submit its programmes for external assessment on a regular basis (every 8 years) and to act on the results of this assessment. The external assessments were based on a self-assessment report of the programme under review, a site visit by an independent panel of experts and a publicly available assessment report. Until 2004, the system focused primarily on quality improvement.

From 2005 to 2013, the quality assurance system further elaborated on the previous system but accreditation by the independent Accreditation Organisation for the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) was added. In addition to improvement, assessments focused more on accountability. Programmes had to score positive on a set of predefined standards to get an accreditation.

In 2013, a new round of assessments and accreditation started. In this next round, the 8-year programme assessments and accreditation were to be combined with a system of institutional reviews. The institutional review was compulsory for all universities and universities of applied sciences and arts and was developed as a periodical assessment of the policy processes of higher education institutions to guarantee high standards of quality.

Decree change in 2015

After one year, the universities and universities of applied sciences and arts felt that this double system of programme assessments and institutional reviews was too demanding. This led to a major change in the Flemish higher education system of quality assurance in 2015.

The decree⁶ change of 2015 offered the universities and universities of applied sciences and arts the opportunity to be responsible for their own external quality assurance system. Institutions had a choice between:

- An institutional review combined with programme assessments and accreditation;
- An extensive institutional review that comprises an evaluation of the manner how universities and universities of applied sciences and arts are able to safeguard the quality of their programmes (called 'eigen regie' in Dutch).

Institutions willing to take part in this extensive institutional review would be subject to transitional arrangements for programme accreditation, i.e. the accreditation of the programmes would be extended for another eight years based on the accreditation of the previous assessment round (2005-2013), except for the accreditation of new programmes, the programmes that had a reduced period of accreditation (improvement trajectory) and international joint programmes that are considered to be accredited in accordance with the conditions/requirements of a European funding programme, e.g. Erasmus Mundus.

All universities and universities of applied sciences and arts opted for an extensive institutional review. In 2016 and 2017, a pilot of institutional reviews was organised by NVAO. The outcomes of these reviews had no legal consequences, but the evaluation of the pilot provided input for decision making of the new accreditation system that will come into force in September 2019.

⁶ A decree is a Flemish law.

Accreditation system from September 2019 onwards

The institutional review, including the assessment of the manner how universities and universities of applied sciences and arts are able to safeguard the quality of their programmes, is anchored in the Higher Education Codex by the decree of 2018. Every six years, the universities and universities of applied sciences and arts undergo an institutional review. If the review is positive, the accreditation of the programmes is prolonged for another six years. New programmes and joint programmes considered to be accredited in accordance with the conditions/requirements of a European funding programme are excluded and still subject to programme assessments. These assessments are based on the quality assurance system of the institution ('eigen regie') and will be organised by NVAO. VLUHR QA does not have a formal role in the institutional review nor in the 'eigen regie'.

Role of VLUHR QA in the quality assurance system

Since 1991, the organisation of external programme assessments mandated by decree has been the core task of VLUHR QA⁷, the quality assurance agency of the umbrella organisations of universities and universities of applied sciences and arts.

As a consequence of the decree change in 2015 and the accreditation system that will come into effect in September 2019, the activities of VLUHR QA mandated by law will decrease and come to an end in 2022. Until 2022, VLUHR QA is responsible for assessing the following programmes of the universities and universities of applied sciences and arts: new programmes, programmes that had a reduced period of accreditation and international joint programmes (European funding). More specifically, activities are related to the assessment of programmes which finish their self-assessment report before September 2019 and the reassessment of Nursing programmes in 2021-2022.

For institutions which are not subject to an institutional review⁸, the system of programme assessment and accreditation remains unchanged. These institutions can choose a quality assurance agency that is EQAR registered. In the past, most of them chose VLUHR QA to coordinate their programme assessments and VLUHR QA is confident that these institutions will entrust the assessment of their programmes to it again.

Because of the limited activities mandated by law, VLUHR QA aims to broaden its scope. This is elaborated in its strategic plan which was approved by the QA Board on 26th November 2018. The strategic plan includes six goals for the future (see section 9.1 also):

- a defined list of programme assessments of universities and universities of applied sciences and arts (until 2022);
- programme assessments of institutions without institutional review;
- assessments of joint programmes pursuant to the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes;
- assessments of Flemish arts programmes;
- programme assessments outside Flanders, especially in the Netherlands;
- disseminate its expertise with HEI and support institutions in quality assurance activities that are not covered by VLUHR QA's assessment activities (cf. projects).

The first two goals are explained above. The other goals are explained below.

⁷ From 1991 until 2013 it was the core task of the predecessors of VLUHR QA (VLIR and VLHORA).

⁸ Vesalius College, Inno.com, College of Europe, University of Kent, Continental Theological Seminary, Flanders Business School, von Karman Institute, Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, Faculteit voor Protestantse Gedgeleerdheid and a number of institutes for post-initial education.

The Flemish Government endorses the European approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (EA). From 2019 onwards, all new joint programmes must undergo an external assessment complying with the EA. These assessments are based on the quality assurance system of the institution (eigen regie). VLUHR QA believes it can play a role in these assessments. Since 2018, VLUHR QA has turned into an active partner for implementing the European Approach for Joint Programmes (EA) for which it developed a manual. This manual describes the assessment protocol used by VLUHR QA. It is also intended for both the programmes and institutions involved as well as for assessment panels. VLUHR QA is currently undertaking information sessions for Flemish institutions about the EA (see section 9.1 also).

From 2020 onwards, VLUHR QA aims to assess the Flemish art programmes and bachelor/master programmes outside Flanders, especially in the Netherlands. VLUHR QA will develop new manuals for those activities.

Apart from those assessment activities, VLUHR QA wants to share its expertise with higher education institutions and other organisations involved in training and education and to support them in their request for quality assurance activities.

4 History, profile and activities of the agency

4.1. History of VLUHR QA

VLUHR QA is the result of a long integration process of the quality assurance units of VLIR (Flemish Interuniversity Council) and VLHORA (Flemish Council of Universities of Applied Sciences and Arts). The task of organising external assessments for universities was entrusted to VLIR by decree from the moment the external assessments started in 1991. Within VLIR, the Quality Assurance Unit carried out this role until 2012. In 2000, a decree appointed VLHORA as quality assurance agency for the Flemish universities of applied sciences and arts. Within VLHORA, the Quality Assurance Unit carried out this role until 2012. Both organisations had checks and balances installed to guarantee the independence of the assessment processes.

In 2009, the Flemish Government requested VLIR and VLHORA to bring their quality assurance activities together into one organisation, the Flemish Higher Education Council (VLUHR). Therefore, the VLUHR was formally established by the Flemish universities, universities of applied sciences and arts and associations⁹ on 20th December 2010. According to the decree and the statutes, VLUHR created an independent entity for its quality assurance activities. With the start of a new accreditation round in 2013, the operational integration of the two quality assurance units was completed. In 2014, the legal integration of all QA staff into VLUHR QA was concluded.

As soon as VLUHR was formally established, it created the independent QA Board. VLUHR delegated all operational decisions about the organisation's quality assurance activities to the QA Board. As all the universities, universities of applied sciences and arts and associations are represented in the General Assembly of VLUHR, this delegation creates additional guarantees for VLUHR QA's autonomy and separates governance structure and quality assurance activities.

Following the decree change in 2015, the VLUHR Board decided that VLUHR QA should continue to be responsible for the coordination of programme assessments. In addition, the VLUHR Board decided that VLUHR QA could complement assessment activities with demand-driven projects related to quality assurance in teaching and training. Therefore, VLUHR QA aims to broaden its scope. This is elaborated in the strategic plan that is approved by the QA Board on 26th November 2018.

⁹ An association is a separate legal entity for collaboration between a university and one or several universities of applied sciences and arts.

VLUHR QA reported these changes to ENQA and EQAR in its Substantive Change Report in 2015. On the bases of this report, ENQA and EQAR concluded that the remaining assessments are carried out in line with VLUHR QA's existing methodology.

4.2. Mission and vision of VLUHR QA

VLUHR QA aims to safeguard and improve the quality of higher education programmes. Furthermore, it wants to share its expertise with HE institutions and other organisations. The mission and vision were defined in 2013 with a timeframe until 2020. This process was organised bottom-up with a staff members working group and input from other staff members. The final text was agreed upon by the VLUHR Board after consultation with stakeholders and the QA Board. Following the decision of the VLUHR Board regarding the continuity of VLUHR QA, staff members and the QA Board discussed the impact of the changes on the mission and vision of VLUHR QA. The changes had significant consequences on the organisation but not on its working methods. The conclusion was that the mission and vision needed no major adjustments but the text was fine-tuned.

MISSION

VLUHR QA is an independent non-profit evaluation body for external quality assurance that contributes to safeguarding and improving the quality of higher education.

It is a partner for stimulating, developing and implementing a quality culture in higher education and it wants to serve all stakeholders as a center of expertise.

VISION

As a learning organisation, VLUHR QA wants to build quality culture in higher education, together with its partners. Because of the independence and expertise of the organisation and of the authoritative experts it works with, VLUHR QA has a special status in relation to educational institutions. That status makes it possible to cast a fresh, critical and constructive eye on education, with respect for individuality. VLUHR QA uses a previously published protocol for its external evaluations. The organisation is EQAR-registered and works in compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG).

VLUHR QA joins forces with institutions and programmes to guarantee a solid quality. Wherever appropriate, it points to problem areas that require improvement and to challenges that can be addressed, as well as to good practices that can serve as inspiration for others. Thus, VLUHR QA wants to convey the trust that society as a whole earned in the quality of institutions and programmes.

VLUHR QA wants to help shape a higher education landscape in which institutions and organisations communicate efficiently and transparently, both internally, to promote their own functioning, and to the outside world, to communicate the quality of education, with special attention to (potential) students.

Based on its experience and expertise, VLUHR QA participates in both the scientific and social debates and ensures a broad and careful dissemination of valid information regarding quality assurance, learning and education.

VLUHR QA wants to be a critical mirror, a source and supporter of innovation and knowledge sharing in the domain of external quality assurance. For that purpose, the organisation is strongly committed to professionalising and developing the expertise of its employees. Employees are the most important capital of the organisation and they are challenged to get the best out of themselves, ensuring a quality operation and a continuous growth of knowledge and experience. On the other hand, the organisation sets up sustainable partnerships with solid partners. That way, VLUHR QA profiles itself as a valuable and reliable partner for knowledge.

VLUHR QA stands for commitment, expertise, independence, transparency, fairness and improvement-oriented work.

The mission and vision are illustrated in five focus areas:

- VLUHR QA strives for a quality and customer-oriented operation as a Quality Assurance Agency.
- Due to its geographically central and strategic location in Europe, VLUHR QA wants to further develop its international network strategically and to give shape to international cooperation with stakeholders in general and cross-border evaluations in particular.
- From its social function, VLUHR QA is strongly committed to efficiently and effectively informing stakeholders in general and (future) students in particular.
- VLUHR QA strives for operational efficiency and an open and transparent organisational culture where employees take responsibilities and are given space to develop themselves as professionals and to grow within or outside the organisation.
- Through the acquisition and sharing of knowledge (inside and outside the organisation), VLUHR QA wants to develop a leading expertise centre to provide effective services to society and stakeholders.

In recent years, due to the decree change, VLUHR QA was in a context that made it more difficult to continue working on the above focus areas in a structural manner. However, VLUHR QA kept paying attention to these focus areas and progression is now visible. Despite the change of context, these focus areas are still valid and inspired VLUHR QA to draw up the strategic plan (see 3.2 - Role of VLUHR QA in the quality assurance system).

4.3. Governance structure¹⁰

VLUHR QA is the independent entity of the Flemish Council for Higher Education, the umbrella organisation of universities, universities of applied sciences and arts and associations (VLUHR). VLUHR is governed by a General Assembly and a Board, representing all members of universities, universities of applied sciences and arts and associations. As VLUHR is the legal body of VLUHR QA, decisions relating to VLUHR QA personnel and finances are made by the VLUHR Board on advice of the QA Board.

VLUHR QA is governed by the **QA Board**, counting four members. The members are appointed for 2 years and are chosen for their expertise. To stress the independent status of VLUHR QA, they have no formal relation with stakeholders. The members of the QA Board are appointed by the VLUHR Board on nomination of the VLUHR QA staff and the QA Board. The QA Board covers the following expertise and knowledge:

¹⁰ See appendix 7

- knowledge of internal/external quality assurance in higher education;
- understanding of higher education in Flanders;
- international expertise;
- expertise in working with projects.

Furthermore, the specific knowledge, understanding and expertise of different stakeholders within HE (teachers/academics, students, QA agencies) was taken into account.

The QA Board is responsible for monitoring the programme assessments and the conformity of these with the respective manuals (Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education and Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes) and for ratification of the panels. It also appointed an appeals committee which independently assesses appeals concerning a specific programme assessment. Finally, QA board members are mandated to represent VLUHR QA, inter alia towards organisations such as ENQA, EQAR and INQAAHE. The QA Board meets at least 4 times a year.

The **quality assurance staff**, counting five members, is responsible for:

- coordinating and organising programme assessments;
- obtaining and organising demand-driven projects;
- monitoring developments in the area of quality assurance;
- preparing and implementing the decisions taken by the QA Board.

The main stakeholders of VLUHR QA are represented in the **Advisory Council**. This council is made up of a representative of the universities of applied sciences and arts, a representative of the universities and a representative of the Flemish Student Council. These are appointed respectively by VLIR, VLHORA and VVS. The Advisory Council meets at least twice a year. Its members can discuss all matters concerning the external quality assurance policy and the assessment procedures of VLUHR QA. All recommendations are presented to the QA Board, where they are discussed and a motivated decision is taken regarding a recommendation.

Appeals regarding an assessment report are handled by the **Appeals committee**, that consists of an acting chair and a deputy chair, and two acting assessors and two deputy assessors. They are appointed by the QA Board on the recommendation of VLUHR QA, for a renewable period of 3 years. The chair has expertise in educational and/or administrative law. The assessors have expertise in educational assessments. The VLUHR QA Board also appoints a permanent secretary and a deputy secretary. The appeals committee works independent. The decision of an appeal is sent to the institution's management and the chair of the review panel involved. Even so, the QA Board is informed of the appeals committees' decisions.

5 Higher education quality assurance activities of the agency

5.1. Activities within the scope of the ESG

Period 2015-2019

Given the decree change in 2015, VLUHR QA coordinates the following assessments, mandated by decree, in Flemish universities and universities of applied sciences and arts:

- assessment of new programmes;
- international joint programmes;
- programmes that had a reduced period of accreditation (an improvement trajectory).

As mentioned before, the above assessments with regard to accreditation by NVAO will be finalised in 2022.

VLUHR QA also coordinates the programme assessments of non-statutory registered institutions. Because these institutions have no institutional review, these programme assessments will continue after 2022. There are 13 institutions without an institutional review representing 44 programmes.

From 2013 until mid-2015, VLUHR QA organised 41 clustered assessments, involving 268 programmes. Over the same period, 19 programmes in an improvement trajectory were reassessed. Since the decree change of 2015, VLUHR QA coordinated the assessments of 20 new programmes, 1 joint programme and 38 programmes in an improvement trajectory. Over the same period, 9 programmes of non-statutory institutions were assessed as well. One programme was assessed according to the European Approach. In 2019, 15 assessments involving 17 programmes are scheduled and 15 assessments are planned in 2021.

The above programmes have been assessed in compliance with the procedures and the framework in the Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education or the Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (see appendix 1 and 2).

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According to its strategic plan, VLUHR QA aims to broaden its scope. Apart from the aforementioned assessments, VLUHR QA aims to be an active partner in implementing assessments according to the European Approach for Joint Programmes. From September 2019 onward, all new joint programmes of Flemish HEI must be assessed following the European Approach. Furthermore, institutions can call upon VLUHR QA to assess their joint programmes based on the

quality assurance system of the institution ('eigen regie'). Additionally, VLUHR QA aims to assess the art programmes of the Schools of Arts¹¹ and the bachelor and master programmes outside Flanders, especially in the Netherlands.

5.2. Activities outside the scope of the ESG

VLUHR QA participates in several quality assurance projects of Flemish universities and universities of applied sciences and arts. In these projects, VLUHR QA shares its expertise with HE institutions and supports the institutions in quality assurance activities that are not in the scope of the VLUHR QA assessment activities. The support VLUHR QA provides is demand-driven and differs from one institution to another. These activities do not refer to typical terminology as evaluation, assessment, review or audit but are (being) executed in line with the ESG. Current supporting activities include the selection and training of experts for internal QA, the draft of Domain Specific Learning Outcomes and acting as an external secretary for internal programme reviews within HEI.

VLUHR QA also shares its expertise with organisations other than universities and universities of applied sciences and arts, such as NVAO, VVS, MUSIQUE, ENQA and FPS Health. Current supporting activities include the establishment of assessment frameworks, carrying out a SWOT analysis and acting as an external secretary for reviews carried out by other agencies. These activities are also demand-driven and do not refer to typical terminology as evaluation, assessment, review or audit.

¹¹ This involves a total of 30 programmes.

6 Processes and their methodologies

6.1. Frameworks

VLUHR QA uses two assessment frameworks. Both frameworks are used for programme assessments.

Programme assessments in Flemish Higher Education

The framework for programme assessments in Flemish Higher Education is used for the programme assessments of universities and universities of applied sciences and arts, more specifically:

- new programmes;
- programmes with a reduced period of accreditation (improvement trajectory);
- international joint programmes considered to be accredited in accordance with the requirements of a European funding programme¹²

The framework is also used for the programme assessments of institutions without an institutional review.

The programme assessment and accreditation in Flanders is oriented on aspects related to the primary process of teaching and learning and the outcomes of the educational process. Personnel policy and internal quality assurance policies are only taken into account in the programme assessment if these policies have a direct impact on the programme level. The policy of the institution as a whole is assessed in the framework of institutional reviews.

The assessment and accreditation framework counts three (generic quality) standards. Each of those standards focuses on one of the following three key questions:

- What is the aim of the programme?
- How does the programme achieve this?
- Are the objectives met?

Those questions are translated into three standards:

- standard 1 – targeted outcome level
- standard 2 – educational learning environment
- standard 3 – outcome level achieved

¹² From 2019 onward, Joint Programmes are assessed following the assessment framework for Joint programmes according to the European Approach (see appendix 2).

For programmes of institutions that are not subject to an institutional review, a fourth standard on the quality assurance system is added to this framework.

- standard 4 - Structure and organisation of internal quality assurance

For each standard, the panel expresses a considered and substantiated opinion according to a two-point scale: satisfactory or unsatisfactory. The definitions set out below are used when assessing the standards.

- **Generic quality** means that the standard is in place and the programme – or a programme study mode – meets the quality standards that can reasonably be expected, from an international perspective, of a Bachelor's or Master's programme in higher education.
- **Satisfactory**
The programme meets the generic quality because it demonstrates an acceptable level for all underlying criteria.
- **Unsatisfactory**
The standard is unsatisfactory.

The panel also expresses a final opinion on the quality of the programme as a whole, also according to a two-point scale:

- **Satisfactory**
The final opinion on a programme is 'satisfactory' if the programme meets all standards.
- **Unsatisfactory**
The final opinion on a programme - or mode of study - is 'unsatisfactory' if all standards are assessed as 'unsatisfactory'. The final opinion on a programme - or mode of study - is 'unsatisfactory' if, after a new programme assessment, one or more standards are still assessed as 'unsatisfactory'.
- **Satisfactory for a limited period**
The final opinion on a programme – or mode of study – is 'satisfactory for a limited period', i.e. shorter than the accreditation period¹³ if, on a first assessment, one or two standards are assessed as 'unsatisfactory'.

Regarding the final opinion on the programme, if standard 4 is assessed 'unsatisfactory', the final opinion is 'unsatisfactory'.

Assessments of international programmes according the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

The assessment framework for joint programmes according to the European Approach has been used from 2018 onward for new joint programmes at Flemish Universities and Universities of applied sciences and arts.

The assessment framework for joint programmes according to the European Approach is based on the following quality standards that programmes have to comply with to get an accreditation:

1. Eligibility (status; joint design/delivery; cooperation agreement)
2. Learning Outcomes (level; disciplinary field; achievement; if applicable regulated professions)
3. Programme (curriculum; credits; workload)
4. Admission and Recognition
5. Learning, Teaching and Assessment
6. Student Support
7. Resources (staff; facilities)
8. Transparency and Documentation
9. Quality Assurance

¹³ The accreditation body (NVAO) decides on the time of the 'limited period'.

For each standard, the panel expresses a considered and substantiated opinion, according to a three-point scale: fully compliant, partially compliant or non-compliant.

- **Compliant**
The programme acts in accordance with the standard and its implementation is effective.
- **Partially Compliant**
Some aspects or parts of the standard are met while others are not. The interpretation of the standard is correct but the manner of implementation is not effective enough.
- **Non-Compliant**
The programme fails to comply with the standard.

The panel must make it clear how it reached its opinion, taking the standards into account. In case the assessment results in a formal outcome, the assessment 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.

6.2. Manuals

The arrangements for carrying out programme assessments are written down in two manuals:

- Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education (appendix 1),
- Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (appendix 2).

The processes and methodologies are largely identical for all the assessments that VLUHR QA carries out. The differences are explained in the next paragraphs. The assessments start with a self-assessment report of the programme. A panel of four independent experts visits the programme, discusses the quality of the programme with all relevant stakeholders, assesses the quality and formulates recommendations for improvement. A programme assessment is concluded with the publication of the assessment report. Such a report is used by the programme to apply for accreditation of an accreditation body.

Steps in an assessment

An assessment project covers six months of preparation (information session, composition of the panel and preparation of self-assessment) and six months of implementation (training and preparation of the assessment panels, site visits and reporting phase). For each assessment project, a VLUHR QA staff member acts as project manager and secretary of the assessment panel.

Preparatory phase

In the preparatory phase, the VLUHR QA project manager informs the programme management about the assessment process. In the case of an assessment according to the European Approach, it's important for all partners of the consortium to be involved, so that the specifications of the programme and the national higher education systems can be discussed. Subsequently, the programme writes a self-assessment report. In the case of the assessment of a programme in an improvement trajectory, the assessment is limited to the standards that were considered 'unsatisfactory' in the previous assessment. Consequently, the programme's self-assessment report needs to address only these standards.

At the same time, the project manager takes care of the panel composition. The programme(s) deliver(s) input in the first phase of the selection by suggesting candidates with subject specific expertise, professional expertise, educational expertise, audit and quality assurance expertise, international expertise and student-related expertise. In assessments according to the European Approach, the panel should be able to take the distinctive features of the joint programme

into account. Additionally, the panel should have knowledge of HE systems of the HEI involved and the instruction language(s) used. The panel should include members from at least two countries involved in the consortium providing the programme. In case of Flemish programmes, a student-member is selected by VVS (Flemish student union). VLUHR QA takes the criteria on independence, expertise and authority into account in selecting the panel members.

The QA Board has to ratify every proposal for the composition of a panel before panel members are invited. Firstly, a proposal for a panel chair and a list of candidate members is presented to the QA Board. After approval, the chair person is invited and after acceptance, he/she makes a proposal to complete the panel composition, which is presented to the QA Board again for ratification. As soon as the panel is complete, the composition is sent to NVAO for advice. Advice from NVAO is an additional check and balance in the external quality assurance system. It's important to mention that VLUHR QA operates independently of NVAO. The QA Board may or may not take the advice into account when inaugurating the panel.

Training panel members

For all assessments, the panel members are trained during a preparatory meeting. This meeting is a physical meeting in Brussels, a video conference (to reduce the travel costs) or – in case of a limited procedure – a meeting on the site visit location prior to the interviews. During the meeting, panel members are trained for the assessment process and get information on programme specifications and the context of external quality assurance and higher education, including the assessment framework. The meeting also contains a first discussion on the self-assessment report. The meeting ends on a communication training. In case a videoconference is organised, a second meeting is held during the first two hours of a site visit. During this meeting, the first impressions of the panel are discussed and the project manager gives a communication training.

Site visit

The site visit phase usually covers a period of around two months. During that phase, the project manager discusses the practical aspects of the site visit with the programme management which prepares the site visit and, finally, the panel visits the programme(s). A site visit takes one day per programme plus half a day of internal meeting time for the panel on average. During each site visit, meetings are held with the programme management, students, teaching staff, alumni, (where relevant) employers and supporting staff (e.g. student counselling). Also, a tour of the programme's main facilities is planned, as well as an open consultation period for any supplementary interview at the invitation of the assessment panel or at the request of a stakeholder. The site visit is concluded with an oral report on the first findings.

Reporting phase

The reporting phase takes about three months. After the site visit, the project manager/secretary writes the draft report. This draft report is discussed with the panel. Upon approval by the whole panel, the draft report is sent to the assessed programme for comments. Programmes are allowed to react within 3 weeks and can suggest factual errors as well as other comments (first feedback round). The panel processes the comments of the programme and finalises the programme report. The report is completed with a summary of the report. If applicable, the panel makes a comparative analysis and the panel can add more policy-oriented advice in the final report. Programmes also get the opportunity to react on the summary and the comparative analysis by the panel (second feedback round). For the assessment of programmes in an improvement trajectory or according to the European Approach, no comparison is required. The final report is published on the VLUHR QA website. The panel has full responsibility for the content of the

report. The QA board can't change the reports as long as the procedures are taken in to account.

Appeals procedure

Since 2009, an internal appeals procedure has been in place. At the time of the second feedback round (final programme report), a programme may submit an appeal against the report in case a standard was considered 'unsatisfactory'. An appeals committee evaluates whether or not the assessment report is clear in its argumentation and whether or not the stated elements support the scores. The appeals committee can decide (1) that the complaint is unfounded, (2) that the panel should better substantiate its judgements, (3) that the panel should visit the programme again in order to re-evaluate the relevant standard(s) again or (4) that a new panel should re-evaluate the relevant standard(s) again.

Accreditation

After the assessment process has been completed, programmes can apply for accreditation with an accreditation body. For programmes in Flanders, this is NVAO. NVAO decides to accredit the programme based on the published VLUHR QA assessment report. NVAO can take three types of decisions: it may decide 1) to grant or 2) not to grant accreditation to a programme, or 3) to grant it for a limited period. In the event of a decision to grant accreditation for a limited period¹⁴, the programme needs to have a new, external assessment carried out on the standards on which the programme was deemed 'unsatisfactory'. For the programme assessments according to the European Approach, an accreditation body can make a decision based on the assessment report and its recommendation for decision, considering the comments by the HEI as appropriate. In case the assessment results in an accreditation decision, it grants or rejects accreditation (with or without conditions), based on the standards.

Project manager / secretary of the panel

Throughout the process, each panel is supported by a project manager who is responsible for preparing the content and practical aspects, as well as the implementation of assessments, and for providing information about the assessment system to the programmes and assessment panels.

The project manager is responsible for ensuring that the assessment manual is followed. The role of project manager is always carried out by a VLUHR QA staff member. For each site visit, a secretary is also appointed by VLUHR QA, who is responsible for preparing and taking minutes during the meetings, and also for drafting and editing the programme report. The project manager takes on the role of secretary. The project manager/secretary is not a member of the assessment panel.

¹⁴ The accreditation body (NVAO) decides on the time of the 'limited period'.

7 Agency's internal quality assurance

VLUHR QA assumes the quality of its work and internal operation through:

- a clear organisational structure;
- clear procedures and agreements;
- experienced staff members;
- stakeholder involvement.

The above elements are elaborated in the quality manual of VLUHR QA. A series of significant elements are highlighted below. More detailed information can be found in part 9.6.

VLUHR QA uses a clear organisational structure, in which powers and responsibilities are defined. The operations of VLUHR QA are shaped by the VLUHR Board, the QA Board and staff members. The secretaries-general of VLUHR (who are as well the secretaries-general of VLIR and VLHORA) and form the bridge between VLUHR and VLUHR QA. The communication also runs with the stakeholders to gather input about our operations.

VLUHR QA uses clear procedures and arrangements for the organisation of its activities and internal operation. The procedures for its work are included in the various documents that are public to the stakeholders. The manuals (appendix 1 and 2) describe, among other things, the requirements set for the panel (criteria and charter of conduct for panel members), the procedure for carrying out an assessment and the appeals and complaints procedure. For the project managers, the procedures are elaborated in a roadmap. The roadmap will be available during the site visit.

VLUHR QA team members are experienced and trained staff members. VLUHR QA focuses on the professionalisation of employees. Staff members follow the national and international trends in the field of quality assurance and regularly participate in conferences, seminars and network events. VLUHR QA is currently working on a professionalisation policy. For that purpose, the existing expertise is being mapped out and VLUHR QA is investigating in which areas the expertise can be strengthened, following the strategic plan (see appendix 8).

In order to monitor the quality of reports, staff members always act as project managers and secretaries. All employees work according to the roadmap. Project managers and secretaries also work in accordance with the principles of a code of ethics (see appendix 5) and in complete independence with regard to the programme and institution concerned. Staff members meet on a monthly basis at least, during a team meeting, to discuss the progress of the assessments and to share experiences. The minutes of the team meetings will be available during the site visit. However, because it is a small team, informal consultations are held regularly.

VLUHR QA frequently surveys its stakeholders. This takes the form of an online survey that is annually sent to the contact persons of the programmes and institutions, and to the panel members. In addition, VLUHR QA organises focus group discussions with them when questionnaires show that some aspects require further study. Finally, the Advisory Council, which includes representatives of universities, universities of applied sciences and arts and students, meets at least twice a year. The results of that consultation, the focus group discussions and the questionnaires are discussed in the team meetings and then reported back to the QA Board. Subsequently, improvement measures are taken. Examples of surveys and focus group discussions will be available during the site visit.

8 Agency's international activities

VLUHR QA pays special attention to the international dimension of external quality assurance. Flanders is a small region. In order to get new insights, international experts (often from the Netherlands) have been involved in external quality assurance processes/panels since their start in 1991. The QA Board is composed of international experts, bringing in an international dimension and international expertise to the organisation.

VLUHR QA also greatly values exchanges with other quality assurance agencies. Exchanges within ENQA, other international networks and projects allow for a deepening and widening expertise within VLUHR QA and foster the professional development of staff members. It also gives VLUHR QA the opportunity to share its own experiences and expertise.

The first partner region for international interactions has always been the Netherlands. VLUHR QA works in a bi-national accreditation system that encompasses the Netherlands and Flanders, with the Accreditation Organisation for the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) as the common accreditation organisation. This system offers an international perspective on how the quality assurance system is set up. Apart from NVAO, VLUHR QA also maintains contacts with its counterpart from the francophone part of Belgium and with its Dutch counterparts.

As previously mentioned, participation in quality assurance networks in Europe and abroad is important. The predecessors of VLUHR QA - VLIR and VLHORA - have both been members of ENQA since 2000. In April 2013, ENQA agreed to transfer the full membership status of VLIR and VLHORA to VLUHR QA as their legal successor. VLUHR QA plays an active role within the ENQA structures and participates in the ENQA seminars and workshops as much as possible. A VLUHR QA staff member is involved in ENQA-peer reviews evaluating European QA agencies. In addition, VLUHR QA staff members work on behalf of the quality assurance agencies NVAO and MUSIQUE. This form of cooperation gives VLUHR QA employees a thorough insight into the working methods of other quality assurance agencies. In the past, good and relevant examples of practice from other organisations were already implemented in the operation of VLUHR QA.

Together with its counterpart in the francophone part of Belgium AEQES and MUSIQUE, VLUHR QA will host the ENQA General Assembly in 2020. In addition, VLUHR QA staff members regularly give presentations about the Flemish quality assurance system at the European Quality Assurance Forum (EQUAF) and other seminars and conferences, as well as in response to requests from higher education institutions, the NVAO and foreign delegations. Furthermore, VLUHR QA is a member of the INQAAHE (International Network of QA Agencies in Higher Education). In

2019, a staff member presented a poster at an INQAAHE seminar. In addition, a staff member is a member of the EURASHE quality assurance workgroup.

Finally, VLUHR QA is registered in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). EQAR has granted VLUHR QA registration until 30th September 2019.

9 Compliance with European Standards and Guidelines (part 3)

After the description of the Flemish Higher Education system and further details on VLUHR QA activities and procedures, this section provides explicit argumentation to demonstrate the compliance of its activities and procedures to the ESG – part 3 (European Standards and guidelines for quality assurance agencies)

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

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

Objectives

The QA activities of VLUHR QA are directly related to the mission and vision of VLUHR QA (see section 4.2), which explicitly mentions that it is VLUHR QA's aim to contribute to the safeguarding and improvement of the quality in higher education. Its core values are commitment, expertise, independence, transparency, fairness and improvement-oriented work.

The mission and vision was established in 2013 and organised bottom-up. The final text was agreed upon by the VLUHR Board after consultation with the stakeholders and the QA Board. Following the decision of the VLUHR Board regarding the activities of VLUHR QA after the decree change of 2015, the QA Board and staff members decided that the changed situation did not affect the mission and vision.

Activities of VLUHR QA within the scope of the ESG

As the change in the quality assurance system of 2015 had an effect on the number of assessments, VLUHR QA redefined its goals for the future, based on the mission, vision and focus areas:

- Goal 1: programme assessments of universities and university of applied sciences and arts (until 2022);
- Goal 2: programme assessments of institutions without an institutional review;
- Goal 3: assessment of joint programmes according to the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes;
- Goal 4: assessment of Flemish arts programmes;
- Goal 5: programme assessments outside Flanders, especially in the Netherlands;
- Goal 6: disseminate expertise between the HEI (cf. projects).

Goal 1

Until 1st September 2019, VLUHR QA has been assigned to organise the **programme assessments** in Flemish higher education by decree. The last assessments that are organised according to the current decree will be finalised in 2022.

Since the decree change of 2015, VLUHR QA coordinated the assessments of 20 new programmes, 1 joint programme and 38 programmes in an improvement trajectory.

Goal 2

From 2015 to now, 9 programmes of non-statutory institutions have been assessed as well. In future, VLUHR QA aims to assess the programmes of the institutions without an institutional review. Based on the earlier experience of the programme assessments of these institutions, VLUHR QA is convinced that they will continue to entrust VLUHR QA with the assessment of their programmes. This involves a total of 44 programmes that need to be assessed in coming years. In 2020, VLUHR QA will design a specific manual for this type of assessments. The manual will be based on the results of the thematic analysis (see section 9.4) and consultation of the institutions involved¹⁵.

Goal 3

With the European Approach for Quality Assurance for Joint Programme (EA) becoming more widely known and important, VLUHR QA wants to take a leading role in the matter. It is expected that the number of assessments according to the EA will increase significantly in coming years. This is why VLUHR QA will develop a method for the coordination of assessments of international programmes according to the European Approach for Quality Assurance for Joint Programmes. The first site visit of an assessment based on the European Approach will take place in March 2019. VLUHR QA aims to conduct two assessments a year based on the EA.

Various assets make this pioneering role for the European Approach a reality. For example, VLUHR QA has previous experience with process supervision of international programmes and programmes in which several partners were involved (joint degrees, Erasmus Mundus...). This is why VLUHR QA decided to develop a manual, based on the previous experiences but also adequately innovative, for example on the alleviation of plan load. This manual was explained to the various programme managers of the joint programmes at the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree (EMJMD) Cluster meeting on the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint

¹⁵ Until now, institutions that do not undergo an institutional review have been evaluated according to the same framework as the study programmes of universities of applied sciences and universities, albeit with the addition of standard 4 (design and organisation of internal quality assurance). As from September 2019, a specific framework will apply to those institutions, resulting in the fact that VLUHR QA will develop a specific manual.

Programmes (Brussels, 24-25 October 2018). In addition, on 15 March 2019, VLUHR QA organised a seminar for Flemish institutions on the general principles of the EA and the execution of programme assessment, according to the manual of VLUHR QA (see section 10.2 also). Also worth mentioning is the fact that the Flemish government fully endorses the European Approach. All new joint programmes are required to be assessed according to the European Approach. The very fact that VLUHR QA itself is not an accreditation organisation is also seen as an asset by interested programmes and institutions. There is some concern among them that accreditation organisations still want their own national regulations to dominate the implementation of the European Approach. Last but not least, our central location in the centre of Brussels, i.e. in the centre of Europe, makes it possible to bring representatives of programmes from all over the world together.

Goal 4 and 5

VLUHR QA aims to assess Flemish art programmes and targets one assessment each year. It also aims to assess the bachelor/master programmes outside Flanders, especially in the Netherlands. The target for these assessments is one to two each year. For these activities, VLUHR QA will develop new manuals. The development is planned for the autumn of 2019, during which a meeting will be held with various stakeholders.

Goal 6

As mentioned in section 5, VLUHR QA shares its expertise with HE institutions and other organisations involved in training and education and supports them in their request for quality assurance activities. These activities are also related to the mission of VLUHR QA, where VLUHR QA describes itself as an essential partner in developing, stimulating and implementing a quality culture in higher education and wants to share its expertise with all stakeholders. These activities, referred to as projects, are demand-driven and differ from one institution or organisation to another. These activities do not refer to typical terminology as evaluation, assessment, review or audit but are conducted in line with the ESG. The projects are organised independently from the other activities to avoid conflicts of interest (see below).

Stakeholder involvement

VLUHR QA has its own governance structure which describes the interaction with the relevant stakeholders (see section 4.3). It has several contacts with VLIR and VLHORA, the umbrella organisations of Flemish universities and the universities of applied sciences and arts. The secretaries-general of both organisations are the bridge between the umbrella organisations and VLUHR QA. The embedding of VLUHR QA in the Flemish Higher Education Council offers the advantage that VLUHR QA employees and those of umbrella organisations see each other daily on an informal basis. This also helps VLUHR QA to keep up to date with what is happening in higher education and in higher education institutions in Flanders. In addition, VLUHR QA is structurally involved as an observer in the Resonance Board that is organised at regular intervals by the government and in which the Flemish HEI, NVAO and students are involved. The evolutions of the quality assurance system are systematically discussed there.

Stakeholders are involved in the daily activities of VLUHR QA. The VLUHR QA's Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education is set up after consulting representatives of the Flemish Higher Education institutions. The student organisation VVS is responsible for selecting student members in assessment panels. Also, higher education institutions and students are represented in the Advisory Council. This council meets at least twice a year and discusses all issues related to quality assurance activities. Furthermore, the HE institutions are involved in the development of the assessment procedures by means of surveys after each assessment round. The results of these surveys are discussed within the Advisory Council and the QA Board.

As mentioned above, the joint programmes were involved during the Cluster meeting on the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (Brussels, 24-25 October 2018) and the seminar for the Flemish higher education institutions on 15 March 2019.

In the autumn of 2019 and spring of 2020, VLUHR QA plans to consult with representatives of the non-statutory institutions with the aim of drawing up a manual that meets the requirements and expectations of those institutions¹⁶. Additionally, VLUHR QA will deliberate with representatives of the School of Arts. Finally, a manual for the assessment of bachelor and master programmes in the Netherlands will be developed in 2020 after consultation with NVAO and HEI in the Netherlands.

International expertise

The assessments are carried out by a panel of independent (inter)national experts. International experience is a prerequisite for the composition of every assessment panel. For each assessment, a different panel is composed with relevant experience in the domain of the involved programme. Panel members are involved in further improvement of the assessment procedures through the surveys after each assessment round.

The members of the QA Board all originate from outside the Flemish higher education sector. VLUHR QA staff members monitor international developments related to HE and QA (see section 8).

Other QA activities outside the scope of the ESG

There is a clear distinction between the assessments and the other activities (projects) VLUHR QA undertakes. The assessments follow a predefined time frame and procedure, set up by VLUHR QA and the assessment reports are used by the programmes to get an accreditation. The assessments are under the supervision of the independent QA Board and executed by an independent panel. Furthermore, VLUHR QA staff members support the panel but are never members of an assessment panel (mentioned in the manuals) and have no say in assessing the standards.

All other activities do not refer to typical terminology as evaluation, assessment, review or audit but they are executed in line with the ESG. The projects are demand-driven: for each activity, there is a specific agreement between VLUHR QA and the institution/organisation describing the service that VLUHR QA will provide.

VLUHR QA has set up a code of conduct (see appendix 6) that guarantees that VLUHR QA staff members involved in both assessments and projects are clear of any conflict of interest:

- The EQAR registration of VLUHR QA is only used in relation to programme assessments.
- A VLUHR QA staff member involved in a project of (a programme of) an HE institution will not conduct a programme assessment of this institution and this for the duration of the project plus two years.
- A VLUHR QA staff member involved in a programme assessment of a HE institution will not conduct a project of that HE institution and this for the duration of the assessment plus two years.
- VLUHR QA staff members involved in an assessment or a project at the same HE institution do not consult each other's work during the duration of the assessment/project.
- Information gathered in conducting a project will not be used in the assessment process.

Additionally, all VLUHR QA staff members need to abide by the ethical code (see appendix 5).

¹⁶ Until now, institutions that do not undergo an institutional review have been evaluated according to the same framework as the study programmes of universities of applied sciences and universities, albeit with the addition of standard 4 (design and organisation of internal quality assurance). As from September 2019, a specific framework will apply to those institutions, resulting in the fact that VLUHR QA will develop a specific manual.

9.2. ESG standard 3.2 Official status

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

VLUHR QA is an independent entity of VLUHR. It is not a separate legal body in itself and is therefore represented by VLUHR in legal and contractual matters. More information on the governance structure of VLUHR QA can be found in section 4 (see also appendix 7).

The roles and responsibilities of VLUHR QA with respect to the coordination of external assessments are established by decree and in the VLUHR Statutes. Until June 2015, VLUHR QA was appointed to coordinate the assessments of all programmes of the universities and universities of applied sciences and arts by decree. The decree change of June 2015 and the new quality assurance system coming into effect in September 2019 affected the position of VLUHR QA.

As a result, VLUHR QA no longer plays a formal role in the quality assurance system for programmes of universities and universities of applied sciences and arts. Nevertheless, in 2015, the VLUHR Board confirmed the position of VLUHR QA as Flanders' (only) QA agency for HE and VLUHR QA continued to be responsible for the coordination of programme assessments (see section 4). The VLUHR Board reconfirmed the position of VLUHR QA in 2018. This is a token of confidence from the universities and universities of applied science and arts in the competences of VLUHR QA.

The change in the quality assurance system of 2015 had an effect on the number of assessments but not on assessment procedure. Consequently, ENQA and EQAR reconfirmed the position of VLUHR QA in organising programme assessments.

Next to the formal recognition by universities and universities of applied science and arts (VLUHR, VLIR and VLHORA), the accreditation body (NVAO), the student body (VVS) and the Flemish Government also endorse VLUHR QA. The latter also is an observer in the Resonance Board consultations with the government, NVAO, students and the HEI. The Resonance Board meets about 6 times a year and is the platform where all stakeholders meet to discuss the legislative aspects of the QA system.

9.3. ESG Standard 3.3 Independence

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

In the Flemish higher education area, VLUHR QA operates independent from all its stakeholders. The QA Board guarantees the independency of VLUHR QA and it intervenes in case of problems. Panel members too operate independently in assessing the quality of programmes; therefore, the formal outcomes of quality assurance processes are independent.

Organisational independence

The Government

The Flemish Government creates the legal framework for assessments organised by VLUHR QA but does not have any formal link with the organisation. The Government does not fund the activities of VLUHR QA, thus guaranteeing financial independency (see section 9.5).

Higher Education Institutions

The statutes of VLUHR determine the delegation of responsibilities regarding the external quality assurance to the QA Board. The quality assurance activities are the sole responsibility of the QA Board and are thus fully separated from the VLUHR governance structure. As VLUHR is the legal body of VLUHR QA, decisions relating to VLUHR QA personnel and finances remain a responsibility of the VLUHR Board. The VLUHR Board, which is composed of representatives of the HEI, has no role in the daily activities of VLUHR QA.

The mandate of the QA Board is specified in the Governance structure. VLUHR QA composes a list of independent candidate members which is endorsed by the VLUHR Board. In a second stage, VLUHR QA selects board members. After acceptance, board members are appointed by the VLUHR Board.

Operational independence

The QA Board guarantees the operational independence of VLUHR QA. The division of labour between the VLUHR Board and the QA Board is stated in a Governance Structure document (see appendix 7).

Assessment activities

The QA Board sets the timetable¹⁷, context and methodology for assessment panels (see manuals in appendix 1 and 2). It supervises the proper conduct of assessments in terms of procedures. The QA Board may intervene if an assessment panel is not working in accordance with the protocols. It may also intervene if a chair or a member of the assessment panel acts in a way that is substantively and/or ethically incorrect (in the case of members, this is done after consultation with the chair of the assessment panel).

To ensure the independence of assessment panels, safeguards are built into the entire panel members selection procedure:

- The programmes to be assessed are only involved in the first phase of the composition of the panel: they suggest candidate panel members and draw up a proposal for a panel chair.
- The chair of the assessment panel can propose additional candidate panel members.
- The QA Board has to confirm every proposal for the composition of a panel.
- Incongruities in relation to the independency of panel members are defined.
- Candidate panel members are required to sign a declaration of independence, including the ethical code and the code of conduct, as a precondition for joining the panel. At the end of the assessment process, panel members have to sign their statement of independence again and have to declare that they have carried out the assessment in complete independence.
- Before the panel officially starts its work, NVAO gives advice on the expertise and independence of the panel (see section 6.2 also).

Independence of formal outcomes

The assessment panel is solely responsible for the content of the assessment report up to when the report is submitted for publication. To guarantee the independence of formal outcomes the following arrangements are in place:

- Panels of independent peers are responsible for assessments.
- As they are nominated by the institutions, VLUHR QA follows procedures to ensure their independence of operation.
- Panel members are chosen for their expertise and have to sign a declaration of independence, including the ethical code and the code of conduct as a precondition for joining the panel.

¹⁷ The timetable of the assessments is available on the website <http://www.vluhr.be/tijdsplan>.

- Each panel is supported by a VLUHR QA staff member who is trained to be a neutral project manager during the whole assessment process.
- Each panel is fully independent within the framework of the manual. The panel consults all relevant stakeholders (staff, students, alumni and employers) during the assessment visit but is fully autonomous in the formulation of its conclusions and recommendations.
- Should problems occur, the independent QA board acts as the responsible body.

The QA Board is responsible for the assessment report from the moment it is published and supervises the follow-up of any additional procedure. An overview of published reports is provided during QA Board meetings.

Other activities

VLUHR QA ensures a strict separation between the assessment activities and the other activities, referred to as projects (see section 9.1 also).

9.4. ESG standard 3.4 Thematic analysis

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

VLUHR QA regularly carries out thematic analyses of assessments results. These take the form of a comparative analysis and are included in the assessment reports¹⁸. In addition, VLUHR QA carries out system-wide analyses. Both analyses aim to disseminate objective information on the assessment procedure and the quality of programmes among other things. It is also an opportunity to share good practices to allow institutions and programmes to learn from each other. The results of the analyses are always discussed during team meetings, with the QA Board and the Advisory Council. Together with the results of the stakeholder surveys, the results of analyses lead to adjustments in the method of VLUHR QA. These analyses are published on the website¹⁹.

Before 2015, the assessments were organised in clusters of (similar or related) study programmes. The 'cluster reports' included a separate chapter presenting the comparative analysis of the assessed programmes. Moreover, common issues arising from the assessments were reported. Given the limited number of assessments since the decree change of 2015 and the very few clustered assessments, it is becoming more of a challenge to organise comparative analyses on the same basis as before.

Therefore, analyses carried out by VLUHR QA in recent years and which it plans to do in coming years are based on the results of a more limited number of programmes. Given the change of the QA system, VLUHR QA analysed the effect of change on assessments procedures. The findings were published in "Thema".

VLUHR QA is currently analysing programme assessments of joint degrees. In 2020, VLUHR QA plans to analyse the first assessment according to the European Approach. The results of both analyses will be taken into account in the further development of the Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. Simultaneously, VLUHR QA is also analysing the programme assessments of non-statutory institutions. The results will be included in the elaboration of the manual for these institutions.

¹⁸ The assessment reports are available on the website <http://www.vluhr.be/rapporten>.

¹⁹ <http://www.vluhr.be/p842>

The new QA system that will come into practice in September 2019 includes that the Flemish Government will conduct comparative and thematic analyses. NVAO is currently outlining these analyses. In the discussions that VLUHR QA had with HE institutions regarding the future of VLUHR QA, the institutions made it clear that they would like VLUHR QA to be involved in these analyses.

9.5. ESG Standard 3.5 Resources

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

VLUHR QA is mainly funded by the Flemish higher education institutions, which is a deliberate choice from the Flemish Government's part. This creates independency from the government and gives ownership to the institutions. In section 9.3 'ESG standard 3.3 Independence', the measures taken to prevent this ownership to have an effect on the process or the outcomes of external assessments are set out.

Within VLUHR, VLUHR QA has a separate budget. The higher education institutions pay for the general budget of VLUHR QA and for the external assessments they receive. The cost per assessment is based on several characteristics of the assessment and is budgeted at the beginning of the assessment cycle. A general agreement on the cost for the assessment is signed with the involved institutions. The income from programme assessment is budgeted until the spring of 2020. From that moment, the income of the programme assessments is decreasing. That's why VLUHR QA defined some clear goals for the future (see section 9.1).

Based on the expected workload from 2015, the VLUHR Board and the QA Board decided that VLUHR QA needs at least 4 FTE until 2022 to organise activities within the scope and in line with the ESG. This number of FTE is necessary for the proper implementation of the strategic plan adopted by VLUHR. The increasing demand for different types and continuing cooperation between the HE institutions and VLUHR QA lead to an increase of the staff to 4,6 FTE in 2018.

Next to the income from the organisation of the assessments, VLUHR QA earns income from the demand-driven projects with universities and universities of applied sciences and arts and other organisations involved in education and training. The income and costs related to the projects are self-sufficient and separated from the assessment budget, in order to ensure full accountability.

The available budget is sufficient to employ the staff necessary to organise the activities of VLUHR QA, including a proactive approach regarding future developments. The budget also comprises funds for staff training and for PR and communication (early 2020, a new website will be launched). Within the approved budget, VLUHR QA can hire extra staff members on a freelance base or for specific projects.

9.6.. ESG standard 3.6. Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

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

As stated in section 7 Agency's Internal Quality Assurance, VLUHR QA is clearly structured and has clear procedures to guarantee the quality of the tasks performed. These include the manuals, the appeals procedure, the complaints procedure and the charter of conduct for panel members. To monitor and adjust the effectiveness of the procedures and the quality of its work, VLUHR QA

has developed an IQA methodology. The IQA policy is ratified by the QA Board and discussed with the VLUHR QA Advisory Council, prior to publication on the VLUHR QA website.

Measurement of stakeholder satisfaction

Online survey

Every year in June, an online survey is sent out to the contact persons of programmes and institutions involved in a programme assessment of the previous year. The contact persons at programme level and those at institutional level receive different questionnaires. In this survey, their satisfaction and experiences during the entire assessment process are screened.

During the same period, the panel members who were involved in a programme assessment are also sent an online questionnaire. This survey also focuses on the entire assessment process. The results of the surveys will be available during the site visit.

Focus group discussions

VLUHR QA organises focus group discussions on an annual basis. One of those meetings takes place with a number of programme and institutional coordinators, the other one with panel members. During the interviews, participants are presented with a number of statements to which they can respond. Finding a sufficient number of participants who are willing to do so has not always been easy. The minutes of the focus group discussion will be available during the site visit.

Stakeholder consultation

At least once per semester, VLUHR QA stakeholders are invited to the Advisory Council. The latter is composed of a representative of the universities, a representative of the universities of applied sciences and arts and a student representative selected by VVS. The Advisory Council discusses different subjects, transcending individual dossiers. In addition, there is an annual consultation with NVAO and VVS. VLUHR QA is an observer in the Resonance Board that consists of representatives of the universities (VLIR), universities of applied sciences and arts (VLOHRA), the government and the student union (VVS). The minutes of the meetings will be available during the site visit.

Intervision

The staff works on significant sharing of experiences and expertise between colleagues. The team meetings are the foundation for this. It is also standard practice for the staff to work according to the four-eyes principle. All reports are read by a colleague before they are published.

Follow up online survey and focus group discussion

The results are inventoried, analysed and then discussed within a team meeting. From this discussion, attention points and actions are identified. Afterwards, results (including attention points and action points) are fed back to the QA Board and the Advisory Council.

The results are immediately incorporated into existing procedures. More complex attention points are discussed with the QA Board first. Because of the rather small size of VLUHR QA, it can make decisions quickly and tailor actions to them. Examples of adjustments include an increased attention for 'communication as a panel member' in the training of panel members, a stronger emphasis on the role of the chairman in the composition of the panel and more attention for the specific expectations of international programmes in recovery.

QA Board

The QA Board bears final responsibility for the quality of assessment reports. Board members receive an overview of the published reports during each meeting and are invited to give their remarks. In addition, the QA Board monitors the proper conduct of assessment during the process. During a meeting, board members are given an update on the status of the assessments and the panel composition is presented.

Quality manual

VLUHR QA works with a quality manual. The quality manual describes all the objectives, procedures and systematics of the VLUHR QA activities in order to ensure high quality organisation. The quality manual is constantly updated for it to abide by the current situation of VLUHR QA. The structure of the quality manual is used as a design for internal document management. The quality manual will be available during the site visit.

9.7. ESG standard 3.7 Cyclical external review of agencies

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

By submitting this self-assessment report for an ENQA peer review, VLUHR QA is fulfilling the requirements to undergo an external review every five year. This is VLUHR QA's first peer review given the 2015 ESG. The previous review took place in 2014 against the ESG 2005. The predecessors of VLUHR QA – the QA units of VLIR and VLHORA – were assessed against the ESG in 2008 and 2009 respectively.

10 Compliance with European Standards and Guidelines (part 2)

This section provides explicit argumentation to demonstrate the compliance of the activities and procedures of VLUHR QA to the ESG – part 2 (European Standards and guidelines for external quality assurance of higher institutions), which in turn includes the first part of the ESG (Part 1 ‘European Standards and Guidelines for internal quality assurance within higher education institutions’).

10.1. ESG standard 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance

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

With the design of the Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education and the Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, VLUHR QA clearly aims to encourage the development of quality assurance and of a quality culture within each programme and higher education institution.

The table below, addresses how ESG Part 1 are included in the assessment frameworks:

ESG	Manual for EQA in Flanders	European Approach
1.1 Policy for Quality Assurance	S2, S4	S9, S1
1.2 Design and approval of programmes	S1, S2	S2.1, S2.3, S3
1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	S2, S3	S5
1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification	S2, S3	S4
1.5 Teaching staff	S2	S7
1.6 Learning resources and student support	S2	S6, S7
1.7 Information management	S1, S2, S3, S4	S1-9
1.8 Public information	S1, S2, S3, S4	S8
1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	S1, S2, S3, S4	S1-9
1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance	S2, S4	S1-9

More detailed information about the framework’s criteria, can be found in section 6 and in the manuals.

ESG Standard 1.1. Policy for Quality Assurance

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

Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education

The external quality assurance system is based on the principle that the institutions themselves are responsible for – and permanently monitor – the quality of their educational activities (Higher Education Codex, Art.II.122). The programmes describe their quality in a self-assessment report (SAR).

In order to guarantee the systematic assessment of the policies and procedures for quality assurance within higher education institutions, the Flemish Government decided to oblige every university and university of applied sciences and arts to undergo an institutional review from 2015 onward. NVAO organises the institutional reviews for the Flemish higher education institutions. Consequently, the programme assessment focuses on the quality of educational processes, rather than on quality assurance procedures themselves: on the quality of objectives (standard 1), educational processes (standard 2) and achieved outcomes (standard 3). While assessing the educational process, the improvement measures carried out at programme level are taken into account, including follow-up of the previous assessment.

The involvement of students, alumni, teaching staff and external stakeholders in quality assurance and the transparency of the quality assurance processes are fixed elements in the assessment of standards 2 and 4.

For institutions which are not subject to institutional review, an extra standard (standard 4) is included in the assessment framework. This fourth standard focuses on 'Structure and organisation of internal quality assurance'. This guarantees that every institution is assessed periodically regarding its quality assurance policies and procedures.

Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

The participating institutions should apply for joint internal quality assurance processes in accordance with part one of the ESG. This is the core of standard 9. Additionally, the EA focuses on the assurance processes that are organised jointly. This is set out in the first standard on eligibility with focus on the joint status, the joint design and delivery of the programme and the presence of a cooperation agreement in which the terms and conditions of the joint programme are laid down.

ESG Standard 1.2. Design and approval of programmes

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

Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education

The intended learning outcomes and their link with the level and orientation of the Flemish Qualifications Framework and the relevant domain specific learning outcomes is the core of standard 1.

The domain specific learning outcomes are developed according to a predefined procedure coordinated by VLUHR QA. All institutions who are involved in a certain programme are engaged in the process. The procedure envisages a student-centred approach and the consultation of (inter)national peers and representatives of the professional field. The domain-specific learning outcomes are validated by NVAO, establishing that they meet the correct level and orientation of the Flemish Qualifications Framework.

Standard 2 takes into account the realisation of the intended learning outcomes into the curriculum, curriculum development, delivery of the curriculum, availability of appropriate learning resources and monitoring of the progress and achievements of students. Involvement of stakeholders is a fixed element in the assessment procedures.

Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

The intended learning outcomes should align with the corresponding level in the national framework and the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area according to standard 2.1 of the EA. Subsequently, the programme must demonstrate that the intended learning outcomes are achieved (standard 2.3). Standard 3 demands that the structure and content of the curriculum fit to enable students to achieve the intended learning outcomes (standard 3.1). Moreover, standards 3.2 and 3.3 respectively take the distribution of ECTS and the workload into account.

ESG Standard 1.3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment

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

Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education

The learning environment is the focus of standard 2. Curriculum, staff and facilities must make up a coherent educational environment that enables students to achieve the intended learning outcomes. Elements that support a student-centred approach are taken into account, such as:

- flexible learning paths and programme options that are attuned to the student's needs or interests;
- adequacy of teaching and learning methods in relation to the intended learning outcomes and the profile of the student population;
- coaching of students and feedback;
- tutoring provision;
- students/alumni satisfaction and the involvement of students/alumni in the curriculum design.

The third standard fully focuses on student assessment and the achievement of intended learning outcomes. Elements that support a student-centred approach are taken into account, such as:

- student assessment that have to be valid, reliable and transparent.
- the organisation of evaluations,
- evaluation approaches in relation to the intended learning outcomes,

- transparency of used criteria,
- feedback to students,
- transparency and quality monitoring of the assessment & examination system.

Therefore, the educational and assessment policies developed by the programme are taken into account as well as recent exams and, where relevant, bachelor's/master's theses and internship reports are screened.

Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

Standard 5.1 on learning and teaching states that '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.' The same elements that support a student-centred approach in the Manual for External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education are in place.

Subsequently, standard 5.2 on student assessment states that '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.'

ESG Standard 1.4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification

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

Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education

The programme-specific study guidance, based on student intake, student progression rate and targeted learning outcomes are part of standard 2. The transparency, validity and reliability of student assessments is the subject of standard 3. The employability of the graduates or progression into a follow-up programme is also addressed in standard 3.

Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

Standard 4 of the EA is about admission (4.1) and recognition (4.2). The recognition should at least be in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and subsidiary documents.

ESG Standard 1.5. Teaching staff

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

Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education

Staff quality is explicitly considered under standard 2. This includes staff policy and the effect of subject specific, educational and teaching qualities in the recruitment, promotion, evaluation and monitoring of staff. Also staff's professionalisation and staff numbers in relation to the number of student to the curriculum and the targeted learning outcomes are taken into account.

Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

As in the other manual, staff quality is explicitly considered. Standard 7.1 is about sufficient and adequate staff (qualifications, professional and international experience) to carry out the programme.

ESG Standard 1.6. Learning resources and student support

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

Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education

Services – both physical facilities and tutoring provision – are explicitly considered under standard 2. The quality of learning resources such as an electronic learning platform and course material are explicitly considered under the same standard.

Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

Student support services are considered in standard 1.6. Next to the fact that they should contribute to the achievement of learning outcomes, they should take the specific challenges of mobile students into account.

ESG Standard 1.7. Information management

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

Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education

During the site visit, the panel has access to the minutes of relevant meetings to get insight in the way the programme is managed.

Collection, analysis and use of relevant information on educational activities on the level of the programme is evaluated under the three standards:

- The gathering of information on student progression and success rates are considered under standards 2 and 3.
- The employability of graduates is an element of the evaluation of standard 3.
- Students' satisfaction with their programmes is linked to the different aspects considered under standards 1, 2 and 3.
- Effectiveness of teachers and the availability of learning resources are evaluated under standard 2.
- The profile of student populations and the institution's own key performance indicators on the student success rate are assessed under standards 2 and 3.
- The way in which the programme collects data on the quality of the programme to pursue a quality assurance policy is assessed under standard 2 and under standard 4 in case of institutions without an institutional review. Essential in this is that the programme is assessed periodically, partly on the basis of measurable targets.

Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

Before and during the site visit, the panel has access to all relevant material collected by the institutions involved. This includes minutes of meetings, the cooperation agreement (standard 1.3), information on the employability of students and information on the workload (standard 3.3).

ESG Standard 1.8. Public information

Standard: Institutions should publish information on their activities (including programmes) which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible.

Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education

The familiarity of all stakeholders with the objectives of the programme is considered under standard 1. Information provision and external communication are considered under standard 2 and the familiarity with the evaluation procedures is considered under standard 3. In case of the assessment of a programme of a registered institution, the feedback loop of the results of IQA is considered under standard 4.

VLUHR QA publishes assessment reports upon assessment completion and before an accreditation decision is made by NVAO.

Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

Standard 8 requires that relevant information on the programme, like admission requirements and procedures, course catalogue, examination and assessment procedures should be well documented and published by taking the specific needs of mobile students into account. Assessment reports are published upon assessment completion.

ESG Standard 1.9. On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes

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

Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education

Until the decree change of 2015, external approval and periodic review were guaranteed through external programme assessments by VLUHR QA and accreditation by NVAO. Internal monitoring and periodic review are explicitly evaluated within the VLUHR QA assessment framework.

- Development of intended learning outcomes and the involvement of employers and society in the development of these learning outcomes are the core of standard 1.
- Standard 2 takes curriculum development with the participation of stakeholders into account. Student and alumni satisfaction are key indicators in the monitoring system, as well as regular interaction with representatives of the professional field.
- The follow-up of the suggestions of the previous external assessment is explicitly assessed in standard 2.
- For those institutions without an institutional review, a fourth standard 'Structure and organisation of internal quality assurance', is added. Essential in this is that the programme is assessed periodically, partly on the basis of measurable targets.

Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

The manual states that an accreditation agency should agree with the involved institutions a follow-up procedure to assess the fulfilment of condition and/or to evaluate the follow-up actions on recommendations. Additionally, the programmes agree to undergo an external evaluation every 6 years.

ESG Standard 1.10. Cyclical external quality assurance

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

Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education

Since 1991 (for universities) and 2000 (for universities of applied sciences and arts) until the decree change of 2015, external programme assessments have been conducted on a cyclical basis. Accreditation is generally awarded for 8 years. As assessment reports are used to request for accreditation, these assessments are also planned in cycles of eight years. The deadlines (report publication date, accreditation application date and transitional accreditation expiry date) are clearly communicated to the programmes and are defined at the beginning of every eight-year cycle. Next to the overview made by VLUHR QA, the Higher Education Register includes the accreditation terms for every programme. The procedures used for external assessments are described in the Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education and are publicly available.

Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

The manual stipulates that joint programmes should be assessed every 6 years, which should be specified in the published decision. If there is an accreditation decision it should be granted – if the decision is positive – for a period of 6 years. During the 6-year period, the agency should be informed about changes in the consortium offering the joint programme.

10.2. ESG standard 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose

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

Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education

For the assessment of programmes in Flanders, the general aims and objectives of quality assurance processes are determined by the Flemish Government. Within the legal framework and the accreditation framework which has been established by NVAO, VLUHR QA has further developed its system of external programme assessments. VLUHR QA developed a Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education that contains explicit and detailed descriptions of all procedures used during the assessment process. This manual has been developed in consultation with the higher education institutions and has been in use since 2013. The manual is available on the VLUHR QA website²⁰ and added as appendix 1. The manual has also been endorsed by NVAO and is in line with the accreditation framework.

The manual is the main document to inform institutions and panels about the process. The following objectives of the external quality assurance system are identified in the manual:

- **Improvement and assurance function:** the use of external quality assurance outcomes as a tool to allow the institution itself to improve and consolidate the quality of its own education.
- **Accountability function:** the use of external quality assurance outcomes as a source of information for the government and for society. This means rendering account to society at large for the efficient and effective use of public funds. It also means generating information for students, their parents and employers, in the form of public reports, on the extent to which programmes meet quality standards.

²⁰ <http://www.vluhr.be/documenten>

- **Regulation of the higher education system:** Quality indicators are used as parameters, e.g. to make decisions on the teaching competences of institutions, the assignment of new programmes, the allocation of funding between education and research.

These objectives are explicitly mentioned in the task description of every assessment panel²¹ as follows. “The assessment panel is expected, on the basis of the self-evaluation by the programme and through interviews carried out on location:

- to express substantiated and well-founded **opinions** on the programme, using the assessment framework;
- **to make recommendations** so that quality improvements can be made where possible and where applicable, to express its findings on the various programmes within a single cluster in comparative terms;
- to **inform** society at large of its findings.”

The procedures and processes which are used and described in the manual similarly apply to all programmes. However, three elements in the assessment process help to ensure the fitness of the general procedures to the individual characteristics of the programmes:

- An information session at the beginning of every project is the moment when the individual nature of the programmes is discussed. Among other things, this covers arrangements about the language of the assessment and assessment report, the involvement of the professional field in the assessment interviews and the information to be supplied, e.g. data about research output and professional involvement.
- The programmes are evaluated by peers. The programmes have a say in the first phase of the assessment panel selection. They propose candidates with subject and educational expertise, audit and quality assurance expertise, international expertise and experts with knowledge of the national educational system. VLUHR QA also pays much attention to the criteria on independence, expertise and authority in the selection of the assessment panels. A student-member is selected by VVS (Flemish students’ union). The QA Board has to agree on every proposal for the composition of a panel before panel members are invited. As soon as the panel is complete, NVAO gives advice on the composition of the panel.
- For every panel, an inauguration meeting is organised where panel members are informed about and trained for the assessment process. During this meeting, they are informed about Flemish higher education and where relevant programme specific information is to be found.

The changes in the decree in 2015 were elaborated in a taskforce, representing all stakeholders, including VLUHR QA. Although the essential features of the existing external quality assurance framework remained, it was an opportunity to optimise the procedures in order to enhance quality culture and to converge more to the revised ESG. The focus of the programme assessment was strengthened by avoiding an overlap with the institutional review and by the fact that VLUHR QA has only carried out non-clustered visits since 2015, which means that customisation can be provided for each programme for the training. For example, the composition procedure of an assessment panel is faster, the daily schedule during the visits can be tailored to the programme completely and the assessment procedure has a faster turnaround time. This leads to increased satisfaction with study programmes, as evidenced by surveys and focus group discussions.

Another aspect that has brought the assessment more in tune with the programme is the flexibility that VLUHR QA applies with regard to drawing up a self-assessment report. In this report, a programme must still demonstrate that it meets all criteria. How it demonstrates this can largely be determined by the programme itself. That way, VLUHR QA provides the programme to be assessed with the opportunity to build up a self-assessment, based on the quality assurance

²¹ See chapter 3 of the manual for external quality assurance in Flemish higher education - appendix 1 and chapter 2 of the manual for the European approach - appendix 2.

tools that their institution uses for its systematic education monitoring under its own direction ('eigen regie' in Dutch).

One of the most striking changes in the current programme assessments is the change from the four-point scale (unsatisfactory - satisfactory - good - excellent) to a two-point scale (unsatisfactory - satisfactory). The reason for this change is twofold. On the one hand, it was difficult for panels to determine the scale with the necessary objectivity between satisfactory, good and excellent in the assessment system with three broad standards. On the other hand, there was an outbid between the assessed programmes to achieve higher scores than the competing programmes in the same domain. Assessment panels were bombarded with reactions of the programmes to the assessment report requesting a score increase when a competing programme received the same or a higher score on a standard. This also strengthened the legalisation of the assessment process. Programmes sometimes appealed against the decisions of assessment panels. This trend has now disappeared.

The introduction of the two-point scale has ensured that the time that panels have spent arguing for a score in the past is now much more devoted to improvement-oriented thinking along with programmes. Much more than in the past, a panel can be a critical friend who nevertheless tests whether the minimum quality threshold is met. The focus of the panel now lies where it should be in a peer review: thinking together with the programme in order to adjust what is less good and to improve what is good or to promote it as a 'good practice example'.

75% of the responding programme managers show satisfaction of the transparency of the assessment framework. 58% of the responding programme managers show satisfaction of the workload of a self-assessment report²².

Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

The assessment framework of the European Approach is taken over in full and unchanged from the assessment framework determined by the ministers of the EHEA. The manual also stipulates the procedure for the composition of a panel, the way in which the site visit is conducted, the assessment is carried out and the report is produced. All this is strongly based on the existing Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education. Some of these procedural aspects were grafted onto the requirements of the European Approach. It is stipulated that at least two panel members must come from a country in which the joint programme is based. Another aspect that is different in this manual is the score scale (see section 10.5) and the provisions concerning follow-up (see section 10.3).

The Manual for the European Approach for External Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes was drawn up in the spring of 2018 and was finally approved by the QA Board in June 2018. This manual was previously discussed in the Advisory Council. In addition, NVAO's advice was also requested. The existing manual is currently being used for the first time. The first site visit using the European Approach will take place in March 2019. At the moment, this SAR is delivered to the ENQA panel, no problems were detected in the practical implementation of the procedures described in the manual.

During a European congress (Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree), the manual was discussed with educational managers of Erasmus+ programmes. On 15 March 2019, VLUHR QA organised a seminar for all Flemish universities and universities of applied science and arts. The purpose of this

²² The added text boxes refer to the results of the latest survey for programme managers and panel members. The survey and the results will be available during the site visit.

seminar was to introduce them to this framework. In Flanders, it will be compulsory for the initial accreditation ('Toets-Nieuwe-Opleiding' in Dutch) of these new joint programmes to be carried out through that approach. Other programmes can use the EA as well. One part of the seminar was devoted to discussing the manual in various smaller groups so that it can be further fine-tuned.

The procedures and processes which are used and described in the manual apply to all joint programmes. However, the three aforementioned elements about the assessment process in the Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education that help to ensure the fitness of the general procedures to the individual characteristics of the programmes, are also in place in this manual.

10.3. ESG standard 2.3 Implementing processes

Standard:

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

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

The four steps mentioned in the standard (self-assessment/external assessment by a group of experts including a student member/publication of the report and formal accreditation/follow-up) are constituent elements of the external quality assurance system and are described in the manuals, which are publicly available. All steps except the last one (follow-up) are equal in both manuals. Information about the various steps and procedures in the process are also given to the programme coordinators during an information session and to the assessment panels during the inauguration meeting.

44 of the 55 responding panel members show high satisfaction with the information given by the VLUHR QA project manager and the clearness of the manuals.

11 of the 12 responding programme coordinators show satisfaction with the information given by the VLUHR QA project manager and the clearness of the manuals.

VLUHR QA emphasises the self-assessment phase of the programmes. The programme writes a self-assessment report (SAR). The SAR should contain comprehensive information that demonstrates the compliance of the programme with the standards. The SAR is deemed to result from a process of joint reflection within the programme and must offer a critical, analytical and future-oriented reflection on the programme as a whole. After receiving the self-assessment report, a panel of peers visits the programme during a site visit. The site visit should enable the panel to discuss the programme based on the SAR and to assess whether the programme complies with the standards. At a preparatory discussion with the programme management, the visit schedule is explained and practical arrangements are agreed for the site visit. The site visit takes at least 1 day. The assessment reports are published on the VLUHR QA website and panel members and programme management additionally receive a hard copy of the report. The reports contain relevant evidence, analysis and conclusions with regard to the standards and also recommendations for further improvement.

All responding panel members show satisfaction concerning the site visit and the collaboration with the VLUHR QA project manager. 93% show satisfaction with the site visit schedule. 10 of the 12 responding programme managers show satisfaction concerning the contacts with the VLUHR QA project manager. The customer-oriented approach is highly appreciated by the programmes.

Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education

Concerning the follow-up, the Flemish Government, the higher education institutions and VLUHR QA fully agree that follow-up of external assessments is crucial to guarantee continuous quality improvement. Therefore, a clear division of tasks is defined by the Flemish Government: institutions are responsible for their internal quality assurance processes, including the follow-up of external quality assurance. The follow-up as part of the assessment process is not a legal requirement.

Within the legal framework, VLUHR QA has developed several measures to make sure that institutions follow up the recommendations for improvement of the assessment panels:

- All recommendations for improvement are summarised at the end of each programme report, to offer a tool to monitor follow-up.
- Programmes get the opportunity to react on their concept programme report. In case they indicate improvement measures they have taken, this is noted at the end of the programme report.
- Each programme is requested to report in detail about the follow-up of all recommendations for improvement in its self-assessment report. This overview is an obligatory appendix to the self-assessment report.

In case of a score ‘unsatisfactory’ on a standard, NVAO limits the accreditation to a maximum period of 3 years. This limited accreditation is based on an improvement plan of the programme. At the end of the accreditation, a panel has to assess the achieved improvement.

In the VLUHR QA review of 2014, the panel reviewed the effectiveness of the monitoring of the action plans and discussed it with external representatives. The panel was convinced that monitoring overall is effectively carried out. However, it recommended that the Flemish bodies in charge should consider whether full responsibility for follow-up reports should primarily rest with VLUHR QA as part of a more structured and transparent process. As explained in section 12, VLUHR QA takes part in the discussions but the follow-up decision is made by other parties. On several occasions in the past, VLUHR QA discussed the desirability of additional follow-up measures for all study programmes with representatives of Flemish higher education institutions. The institutions clearly indicated they don't see the need for additional follow-up by VLUHR QA.

Nevertheless, in November 2018, the QA Board decided that a follow-up would become part of any assessment in future. The cost of this follow-up will be included in the cost of the assessment but the institution/programme involved can decline the proposition (see appendix 4).

Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

Within the framework of this manual, an accreditation agency should agree with the cooperating institutions for a follow-up procedure to assess the fulfilment of conditions and/or to evaluate the follow-up actions on recommendations. This procedure is sufficient for VLUHR QA provided it complies with the VLUHR QA procedure. If the accreditation body does not require a follow-up, the follow-up procedure of VLUHR QA is applicable (see appendix 4).

10.4. ESG standard 2.4 Peer-review experts

Standard:

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

The procedure for the composition of an assessment panel is largely identical in both manuals.

Criteria for selection of the panel

The programmes are assessed by a panel of peers. On principle, each panel is made up of four members, including a student-member. The panel is composed in such a way that it allows discussion between peers and experts on the one hand and the programme management and stakeholders on the other hand. Therefore, a panel must be authoritative, independent and expert:

- **Authoritative:** It is important that the panel is composed of respected specialised colleagues who have required sufficient authority with the discipline of the assessed programme. In order to guarantee this authoritative status, the programmes to be assessed have an input in the panel selection process.
- **Independent:** The assessment process must take place without influence from any interested party. VLUHR QA has strict requirements in terms of independence. During the selection process, VLUHR QA explicitly checks the independence of each panel member.
- **Expert:** The expertise of the panel must encompass the entire discipline area covered by the programmes to be assessed, including insight in national and international developments in the discipline, must pay attention to the educational structure of the programme and must have sufficient insight into the structure of higher education. Therefore, the panel as a whole must have subject expertise, international expertise, professional expertise, educational expertise, audit or assessment expertise and student-related expertise.

Each panel member must declare its independence by signing an independence statement before and after completion of the assessment. Each panel member must sign the ethical code of conduct too.

Selection procedure

The programme(s) have input in the first phase of the assessment panel selection by proposing candidates with:

- Subject expertise,
- International expertise,
- Professional expertise,
- Educational expertise,
- Assessment or audit expertise,
- Student-related expertise.

A combination of these types of expertise should be represented on the assessment panel. Each application must be supported with a CV. VLUHR QA also pays close attention to the criteria on independence, expertise and authority in the selection of the panel members.

In assessments according to the European Approach, the panel should be able to take the distinctive features of the joint programme into account. Additionally, the panel should possess knowledge of the HE systems of the HEI involved and the language(s) of instruction used. The panel should include members from at least two countries involved in the consortium providing the programme. In case of a Flemish programme, a student-member is added by VVS. In other cases, VLUHR QA selects the student-member. It is important to mention that the students are a full member of the panel.

The QA Board has to ratify every proposal for the composition of a panel before panel members are invited. Firstly, a proposal for a panel chair and a list of other candidate members is presented

to the QA Board. After approval, the chair person is invited and after acceptance, the chair makes a proposal about other panel members which is again presented to the QA Board for ratification. As soon as the panel is complete, the composition is sent to NVAO for advice. The time needed for the composition of the panel depends on the availability of panel members but takes no longer than 6 months and runs at the same time the programme is drafting the SAR.

Training and briefing

All panel members are trained during a preparatory meeting. This meeting is a physical meeting in Brussels, a video conference (to reduce travel costs) or – in case of a limited programme assessment – a meeting at the location of the site visit prior to the interviews with the programme stakeholders. During the meeting, panel members are trained for the assessment process and informed about specifications of the programme and the context of external quality assurance and higher education, including the assessment framework. The meeting also contains a first discussion on the self-assessment report. The meeting ends with communication training. In case a videoconference is organised, a second meeting is held during the first two hours of the site visit. During that meeting, the first impressions of the panel are discussed and the project manager gives communication training.

11 of the 12 responding programme managers show satisfaction with in the way the panel was composed and believed the panel was independent and expert. The involvement of the programmes in selecting panel members is seen as an important aspect of the assessment process.

92,5% of responding panel members show satisfaction with the composition of the panel.

In the previous review, the panel suggested ‘that VLUHR QA keeps under close review with their funders the operation of the subject panels in terms of their strength and depth, their training and overall capacity to undertake their designated role’. More information can be read in section 12.

10.5. ESG standard 2.5 Criteria for outcomes

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

The criteria for assessment as well as decision-making rules are explained in detail in both manuals. To guarantee consistency in decision-making, the panel has to express a considered and substantiated opinion for every standard. The opinions are supported by facts and analyses and make use of illustrative examples wherever possible. The panel must make clear how it reached its opinion, taking into account the (criteria of the) standard. In doing so, the panel takes the follow-up of the recommendations of the previous assessment and the programme's future plans into account. Clear evaluation criteria are formulated per standard to guide the assessment panels in their judgement. The scoring criteria and decision-making rules are also determined and published in the manuals.

According to the Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education the panel expresses for each standard a considered and substantiated opinion, according to a two-point scale: satisfactory or unsatisfactory. The definitions set out below are used when assessing the standards.

- Generic quality means that the standard is in place and the programme – or a study mode – meets the quality standards that can reasonably be expected, from an international perspective, of a Bachelor's or Master's programme in higher education.

- Satisfactory
The programme meets the generic quality because it demonstrates an acceptable level for all the underlying criteria.
- Unsatisfactory
The standard is unsatisfactory.

The panel also expresses a final opinion on the quality of the programme as a whole:

- Satisfactory
The final opinion on a programme is 'satisfactory' if the programme meets all standards.
- Unsatisfactory
The final opinion on a programme - or study mode - is 'unsatisfactory' if all standards are considered 'unsatisfactory'. The final opinion on a programme - or study mode - is 'unsatisfactory' if one or more standards are still considered 'unsatisfactory' after a new programme assessment.
- Satisfactory for a limited period
The final opinion on a programme - or study mode - is 'satisfactory for a limited period', i.e. shorter than the accreditation period, if, on a first assessment, one or two standards are considered 'unsatisfactory'.

These opinions also apply to the final opinion on programmes offered by non-statutory institutions. The opinion on the fourth standard is not included under those rules but it must be 'satisfactory' at least. If standard four is deemed 'unsatisfactory', the final opinion is 'unsatisfactory'.

For assessments of joint programmes according to the European, the panel expresses a considered and substantiated opinion for each standard, according to a three-point scale: fully compliant, partially compliant or non-compliant.

- Compliant
The programme acts in accordance with the standard and its implementation is effective.
- Partially Compliant
Aspects or parts of the standard are met while others are not. The interpretation of the standard is correct but the implementing manner is not effective enough.
- Non-Compliant
The programme fails to comply with the standard.

The consistent application of these criteria and decision-making rules is monitored and promoted by:

- Working with one project manager per assessment, who also acts as the assessment panel's secretary. The project manager informs the assessment panel about the criteria and decision-making rules during the inauguration or preparatory meeting and monitors them during the visit and the compilation of the report. The project manager/secretary is not a panel member but plays an important role as a guardian of the procedures and criteria for decisions.
- The use of the detailed manuals (Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education and the Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes).
- The use of standardised assessment forms that expresses the assessment framework in operational terms and contains the standards and criteria on which the panel has to form an opinion.
- For Flemish programmes, an approved discipline-specific learning outcome framework is established by the involved programmes. The panel evaluates each programme against this framework.
- Draft programme reports are read by other VLUHR QA staff members for consistency of judgement and published reports are read by members of the QA Board.

- The manageability of the standards and criteria and the quality of the reports is monitored within focus group discussions and the surveys in the internal quality assurance.

80% of responding panel members think the assessment framework is clear.
75% of responding programme managers show satisfaction about the clearness of the assessment framework.

The draft programme report is sent to the programme management for reaction. The programme can react on factual or substantive inaccuracies. The panel decides whether or not it takes the programmes' remarks into account but the panel has to explain why it does not so.

Strictly speaking, VLUHR QA does not take any formal decisions on the results (assessment reports) of its external quality assurance activities. This power lies with accreditation organisations, which make formal accreditation decisions. For programmes in Flanders, NVAO independently checks whether judgements in the VLUHR QA reports are based on the published criteria and are applied consistently. If NVAO finds this is not the case, it can request additional information from the assessment panel or even request an additional assessment. The QA system with an external panel of peers, which assesses the programme, and the subsequent independent check of NVAO guarantees a consistent implementation of the procedures and criteria.

10.6. ESG standard 2.6 Reporting

Standard: Full reports by 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.

All reports are fully published, including those that resulted in a negative conclusion. A report always is the result of the assessment done by the panel as a whole including the student. Panel members are involved in different stages of the reporting phase:

- final internal discussion at the end of site visit;
- filling in a substantiated checklist of the assessment at the end of the site visit;
- discussing and approving the first draft of the report (before sending the draft to the programme management);
- discussing and approving the final draft of the report (after the reaction of the programme management).

VLUHR QA believes the results of programme assessments, written down in a publicly available report, could be useful for a broad readership: programmes, accreditation bodies, government, students and employers.

The programme management and staff should understand the opinions of the panel and consequently get suggestions for further improvement. The structure and content of the reports follow the standards from the assessment framework and are thus set. At the end of each programme report, a summary of suggestions for improvement is published to facilitate follow-up.

Although VLUHR QA invested in writing accessible reports for a broader readership, it proves very difficult to fit both the needs of an accreditation body and the programmes, and the needs of students and employers. Therefore, a separate executive summary has been introduced for every programme report. This summary gives insight in the profile of the programme, the educational

approach, facilities provided to students, information about the labour market position of alumni and the achieved learning outcomes.

All assessment reports (and executive summaries following the Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education) are available on the VLUHR QA website²³ from the day of their formal handover. Also in the Higher Education Register²⁴, there is a link to the accreditation decisions and the underlying assessment reports.

91% of responding programme managers show satisfaction with the recognisability and readability of the reports. 91% show satisfaction with the quality of recommendations. 82% of responding programme managers show satisfaction with the possibility to give a reaction on the draft report. 73% are satisfied with the way the panel takes the reaction into account. 95% of responding panel members are satisfied with the readability of the reports.

10.7. ESG standard 2.7 Complaint and appeal

Standard: Complaint and appeal processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to the institutions.

Although VLUHR QA doesn't make formal accreditation decisions, complaints and appeals procedures are in place both for the assessment carried out in accordance with the Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education and the Manual for the European Approach:

- Regarding the outcome of an assessment, the programme has the possibility to give feedback on the draft assessment report. It is the panel's decision to take this feedback into account. The panel has to motivate it if it does not include the feedback of the programme in the assessment report. The programme has the possibility to publish an appendix in the public report if it doesn't agree with the panel.
- In case a standard is evaluated as unsatisfactory, the programme can submit a formal appeal. An internal appeals committee, appointed by the QA Board, then evaluates whether the assessment report is clear in its argumentation and whether the stated elements support the scores. The appeals committee can decide (1) that the complaint is unfounded, (2) that the panel should better substantiate its judgements, (3) that the panel should visit the programme again in order to re-evaluate the relevant standard(s) again or (4) that a new panel should re-evaluate the relevant standard(s) again.
- Regarding the assessment process and the conduct of panel members or project manager/secretary, the programme can submit a formal complaint to the QA Board.

The appeals and complaints procedures are easily accessible on the VLUHR QA website²⁵.

Since the decree change in 2015, there has been no appeal or complaint. VLUHR QA believes this is explained by the disappearance of cluster assessments leaving more room for focus on customisation. These lead to greater satisfaction of the programmes.

²³ <http://www.vluhr.be/rapporten>

²⁴ <https://www.highereducation.be/home>

²⁵ Complaint procedure: <http://vluhr.be/media/docs/klachtenprocedure%20VLUHR%20KZ.pdf>
Appeal procedure: <http://www.vluhr.be/media/docs/Visitatieprotocol%202015-2021/interne%20beroepsprocedure%20versie%2020131021.pdf>

11 Information and opinions stakeholders

VLUHR QA emphasizes a good relation with its stakeholders. As described earlier, VLUHR QA meets the stakeholders on a frequent basis. During the preparation of the SAR, VLUHR QA had additional meetings with a board member of the student union (VVS), with the board, the management and the staff of the accreditation body (NVAO) and with the representatives of the universities and the universities of applied sciences and arts.

11.1. Students

Policy

VVS is part of the VLUHR QA Advisory Council. In addition, VLUHR QA and VVS hold an annual meeting at the beginning of each academic year within the framework of the agreements for the selection of students.

VVS states that it considers its involvement in VLUHR QA to be worth the investment. It has the feeling that students are strongly involved in quality assurance. Like in the case of VLUHR QA, students are involved in the Resonance Board where the future of the quality assurance system in Flanders is discussed. Within the HEI too and according to VVS, students are well involved in the quality assurance of institutions.

VVS indicates that it is not asking for a formal seat on the QA Board. On the one hand because the topics that are important to students are already discussed in the Advisory Council and, on the other hand, because the staffing of VVS does not allow to invest resources/human capacity in this. The current involvement of students in VLUHR QA is considered constructive and good.

Selection of students for assessment panels

VVS selects the students taking part in assessment panels. It considers itself to be an active partner of VLUHR QA regarding the composition of an assessment panel.

VVS indicates that VLUHR QA outlines a clear profile of the type of student needed in an assessment panel. However, this is done without being too steering. This enables VVS to search for students in an open manner.

VVS itself does not organise any training for students. According to VVS, a student must not think too much as a part of a system and must retain his/her individuality as a student. When

selecting students, VVS pays attention to their experience, including experience as a student representative.

VVS appreciates the fact that there is an easily accessible contact person at VLUHR QA.

Students who are interested in participating in an assessment panel sometimes wish to know the date of the assessment visit when they are selected. This is because, at certain times, they may have to take a compulsory internship, for example. Those students sometimes quit because the visit dates are only planned when the panel has been fully composed and each member has indicated his/her preference.

Making contacts within HEI in the search for certain student profiles is not always easy for VVS. On the website of some HEI, for example, it is difficult to find the contact details of a programme manager.

Students in assessment panels

VVS indicates that for a student in an assessment panel, the preparatory meeting is a good way to start collaborating: “The rather informal atmosphere makes you feel at ease as a student. It is also being made clear to you that you are a full member of the panel.” Panels seem to be aware of the specific expertise that a student can provide.

Communication is accessible. “It doesn’t feel too formal so you as a student don’t have the feeling that you need to behave differently or needn’t be afraid to say something wrong.”

Depending on the assessment, the SAR can be available a short time only before the assessment. This is not always convenient for students.

11.2. Intervention with NVAO

On 18 February 2019, the annual meeting between VLUHR QA and NVAO took place.

NVAO recognises the importance of a Flemish ENQA- and EQAR-registered agency, especially with the implementation of the European Approach in view. NVAO thinks that VLUHR QA, as an ENQA- and EQAR-registered agency, can also implement the European Approach in the Netherlands.

The elements below were discussed to strengthen the functioning of VLUHR QA:

- In accordance with the accreditation framework, the assessment panel checks at least ten student theses prior to the site visit to assess the level of the programme achieved. NVAO would like the number of the theses to be mentioned more explicitly in the assessment report.
- After ratification by the QA Board, the composition of the panel will be submitted to NVAO for advice. Concerning the assessments following the EA, NVAO asks VLUHR QA to state clearly in what way the panel has knowledge of the higher education landscape of the various countries involved in offering the joint degree.
- Sometimes, a Flemish programme is offered on a Flemish and on a foreign campus. In the past, representatives of these campuses were sent to the institution’s Flemish campus during the site visit and images of the foreign campus were shown to the panel. That way, the panel could form a clear picture of the foreign campus. At NVAO’s request, VLUHR QA will be visiting the foreign campuses of Flemish institutions in the future.

11.3. Consultation of the Advisory council

The Advisory Council consists of a representative of VLIR, VLHORA and VVS. The aim of the Advisory Council is to strengthen the links between VLUHR QA and the main stakeholders, namely the umbrella organisations VLIR and VLHORA and the student umbrella organisation VVS.

A large delegation of representatives of the institutions was invited to the meeting on 6 February 2019.

The institutions consider VLUHR QA as an organisation of professional employees operating on the basis of a recognised approach. They indicate that the programmes are familiar with VLUHR QA through the assessments. A programme that was not involved in an assessment, does not know VLUHR QA. The layered quality assurance system (programme management, VLUHR QA and NVAO) is confusing for many programme representatives. Moreover, there is a great deal of confusion between VLUHR, VLUHR QA, VLIR and VLHORA. Increased visibility of VLUHR QA towards the individual programmes is not desirable, as it would otherwise become even more confusing for them.

The institutions have indicated that in future they would like to receive additional support from VLUHR QA in the following fields:

- Training and support of the HEI's personnel who takes on tasks in the internal quality assurance ('eigen regie');
- Training of specific target groups (e.g. lecturers/lectors of degree programmes);
- Training and support in analysing QA related data;
- Feedback to HEI on their internal quality assurance system ('eigen regie');
- External partner in the HEI internal quality assurance system ('eigen regie');
- Support system-wide analysis.

With respect to the latter, it is indicated that VLHORA has repeatedly insisted on support from VLUHR QA. VLIR indicates that it is important that the ownership of the system-wide analyses lies with the institutions, but that the possibility of engaging VLUHR QA is included. VLUHR QA confirms that it is available to give support.

The institutions ask VLUHR QA to improve the flow of reports from the Advisory Council to all institutions. VLUHR QA indicates that a new website will soon be developed and is investigating what information should be included on the website:

- Assessment reports;
- Composition of panels;
- Time schedule and documents related to the execution of an assessment;
- Links to international partner organisations.

The institutions would also like to receive a newsletter containing information about what is happening on the international quality assurance forum.

The institutions appreciate the customisation that is currently being provided when carrying out an assessment. It is indicated that the panel's composition is generally fast and smooth. VLUHR QA communicates well about this. In addition, VLUHR QA gives the institutions the opportunity to submit a self-assessment report on the basis of the structure and documentation of their internal quality assurance system ('eigen regie').

The institutions indicate that the recommendations that an assessment panel puts forward, are often different, depending on who is part of the panel. The chairman is decisive in this respect, as is the presence or absence of pedagogues as educational experts. VLUHR QA explains that a communication training course has been built in for a number of years and that the project manager ensures during the visit that the panel members enter into dialogue with the programme stakeholders in an appreciative manner.

VLUHR QA is currently developing a follow-up procedure to be in line with the European provisions in this respect. The institutions stress that they are not asking for a follow-up procedure.

The institutions are satisfied with the quality of the reports. They welcome the fact that the reports are concise and readable. This helps to make the reports accessible to a wider audience. The report should make clear what is good and what can be better in a programme. The separation between the findings and the panel's considerations can help here. The recommendations should be specific, without pushing the programmes into a straitjacket. It is to be avoided that the panel includes the improvement points that a programme mentions in its self-assessment report. It is requested that the reports indicate the panel's preliminary impression based on a reading of the self-assessment report and how this was adjusted or confirmed through the interviews and the analysis of material during the site visit.

12 Recommendations and main findings from previous review and agency's resulting follow-up

12.1. Aspects of good practice

In addition to examining VLUHR QA's compliance with the ESG, the previous panel also identified a number of commendable features of its work:

- On the overall, the panel believes that the Agency has engaged purposefully and made realistic progress with the recommendations of the previous ENQA reviews of its legacy organisations, given the external constraints under which it operates.
- The panel was impressed by the energy and commitment of VLUHR QA staff and its future ambitions.
- The Agency's progress in and commitment to developing its own internal QA procedures.

12.2. Summary of recommendations

The previous panel made a number of specific recommendations to VLUHR QA. These are:

ESG 2.4 Processes fit for purpose (ENQA Criterion 1 cont.)

Standard: All external quality assurance processes should be specifically designed to ensure their fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for them.

Panel judgement: Fully compliant

"...Whilst the VLUHR QA teams were operating in an overall satisfactory way at present, the Panel noted that recent budget cuts had reduced their number by one member. The Panel considered that the VLUHR QA teams were now operating at a knife-edge in terms of ensuring sufficient educational expertise was available for the review."

Panel Recommendations:

That VLUHR QA keeps under close review with their funders the operation of the subject Panels in terms of their strength and depth, their training and overall capacity to undertake their designated role.

Follow-up

As stated in the manual, project managers monitor the necessary expertise of each assessment panel: subject-level expertise, pedagogical/educational expertise, audit and quality assurance expertise, international expertise and professional experience. In addition, the following specific criteria are applied for all panel members:

- Credibility of the expert in the academic community;

- Absence of any conflict of interest with the institution under review;
- Ability to integrate with the activities of the expert group.

Every panel composition must be ratified by the QA Board, who closely monitors the educational expertise of the panel. More specifically, the panel must have experience in developing and organising educational processes. In addition, VLUHR QA strengthened its training and briefing of panel members. The training now focuses more on the structure and organisation of higher education and includes a session on quality assurance and culture. Both elements strengthen the educational expertise of the panel. In future manuals, VLUHR QA will integrate the aspect of diversity in the composition of the panel.

ESG 2.6 Follow-up-procedures (ENQA Criterion 1 cont.)

Standard: Quality assurance processes which contain recommendations for action or which require a subsequent action plan, should have a predetermined follow-up procedure which is implemented consistently.

Panel judgement: Substantially compliant

“...57. The Panel reviewed the effectiveness of the monitoring of the action plans and discussed it with external representatives; despite the split responsibilities for the effective monitoring of follow-up, it believes that monitoring overall is effectively carried out. It would recommend, however, that the role of VLUHR QA should become more central to the process as the recipient of follow-up reports.”

Panel Recommendations:

That the responsible Flemish bodies consider whether full responsibility for consideration of follow-up reports should rest primarily with VLUHR QA as part of a more structured and transparent process.

Follow-up

The follow-up of the recommendations of the assessment panel is not a legal requirement, nor is it supported by the institutions. On several occasions in the past, VLUHR QA discussed the desirability of additional follow-up measures for all study programmes with representatives of Flemish higher education institutions. The higher education institutions clearly indicated they don't see the need for additional follow-up by VLUHR QA.

Nevertheless, in November 2018, the QA Board decided to include a follow-up procedure (see appendix 4) as part of the future assessment process. The cost of this follow-up is included in the cost of the assessment but the institution/programme involved can decline the proposition.

ESG 2.8 System-wide analysis (ENQA Criterion 1 cont.)

Standard: Quality assurance agencies should produce summary reports describing and analysing the general findings of their reviews, evaluations, assessments etc. from time to time.

Panel judgement: Partially compliant

Panel Recommendations:

That VLUHR QA considers how the outputs from its review activities can be further focused to support system-wide analysis and institutional quality improvement and enhancement. The Panel recognises the constraints currently faced by the Agency through significant financial pressures and the volume of procedure-driven activity. However, it is recommended that, to fully realise its potential, the Agency discuss with its stakeholders options to increase its resources for this purpose. The additional resource thus gained could then be directed to increase the volume of system-wide analysis and quality enhancement activity which VLUHR QA can undertake.

Follow-up

Before 2015, the assessments were organised in clusters of (similar or related) study programmes. The 'cluster reports' included a separate chapter presenting the comparative analysis of the assessed programmes. Moreover, common issues arising from the assessments were reported. Given the limited number of assessments since the decree change of 2015 and the very few clustered assessments, it is becoming more of a challenge to organise comparative analyses on the same basis as before.

Therefore, analyses carried out by VLUHR QA in recent years and which it plans to do in coming years are based on the results of a more limited number of programmes. VLUHR QA analysed the effect of change on assessments procedures. The findings were published in "Thema".

VLUHR QA is currently analysing programme assessments of joint degrees with an estimated deadline for delivery in October 2019. In 2020, VLUHR QA plans to analyse the first assessment according to the European Approach. The results of both analyses will be taken into account in the further development of the Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. At the same time, VLUHR QA is also analysing the programme assessments of non-statutory institutions. The results will be included in the elaboration of the manual for these institutions.

The new QA system that will come into practice in September 2019 includes that the Flemish Government will conduct comparative and thematic analyses. NVAO is currently outlining these analyses. In the discussions that VLUHR QA had with the HE institutions regarding the future of VLUHR QA, the institutions made it clear that they would like VLUHR QA to be involved in these analyses.

ESG 3.3 Activities (ENQA Criterion 1 cont.)

Standard: Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities (at institutional or programme level) on a regular basis.

Panel judgement: Fully compliant

Panel Recommendation:

The Panel would urge the Agency to position itself at the centre of the debate on future approaches to QA; in the Panel's view, the Agency has much to offer the sector through its accumulated expertise, sector knowledge and accumulated institutional performance data. VLUHR QA operates a comprehensive and complex set of external quality assurance procedures at programme level and a new institutional review method is being rolled out. It is open for discussion as to whether the combined weight of these procedures is really the optimum mechanism for the maintenance and enhancement of quality in Flemish HE. It is under discussion as to whether programme-level and institutional-level accreditation may in future be merged into a single process. It is recommended for VLUHR QA to position itself at the centre of this debate with Government and HE stakeholders; it has much valuable experience and insight to offer in the debate.

Follow-up

As already explained, the quality assurance system changed profoundly in 2015 and the development of this new system of external QA has been led by the Flemish government in close collaboration with NVAO and the representatives of HE institutions. The involvement of VLUHR QA (and other stakeholders) in this process has regretfully been minimal. In 2018, this system was evaluated and the conclusions were used to design the quality assurance system that will come into effect from September 2019 onwards. Through its presence at the Resonance

Board, VLUHR QA is showing its close involvement in the reform of the quality assurance system. However, the reduction in the proportion of programme assessment in Flanders has reduced its influence on the discussion.

This is why VLUHR QA makes an increasing use of its expertise in the international forum (European Approach - programme assessments in the Netherlands) and in other domains (programmes in the artistic field of the creative arts). In doing so, VLUHR QA focus on involving and informing all relevant stakeholders.

ESG 3.4 Resources (ENQA Criterion 3)

Standard: Agencies should have adequate and proportionate resources, both human and financial, to enable them to organise and run their external quality assurance process(es) in an effective and efficient manner, with appropriate provision for the development of their processes and procedures (and staff) (Addition by ENQA for ENQA criterion).

Panel judgement: Substantially compliant

Panel Recommendation:

That the full merger of staff into the new organisation be completed as soon as possible.

Follow-up

VLUHR QA staff is employed by VLUHR. VLUHR QA staff is relatively small but is sufficient to execute all assigned activities, including a proactive approach regarding the future. The change in the QA system led to a reduced staff. For the moment, 5 members of staff (4.6 FTE) are employed.

ESG 3.6 Independence (ENQA Criterion 5)

Standard: Agencies should be independent to the extent that they have autonomous responsibility for their operations and that the conclusions and recommendations made in their reports cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders.

Panel judgement: Substantially compliant.

Panel Recommendation:

That VLUHR QA should consider a strengthening in the involvement of students and representatives of industry and professional bodies in its governance arrangements. Its stakeholder profile outside the higher education sector is limited.

Follow-up

The new QA Board and Advisory Council were established in 2017. As explained in section 4.3, it was a deliberate choice from the start to select independent experts in quality assurance and/or higher education for the QA Board. Although there is no formal representation of student or professional bodies, the board members are selected for their specific knowledge, understanding and expertise of different stakeholders within HE (teachers/academics, students and QA agencies). Moreover, the student union (VVS) expressed its satisfaction with their present involvement in the activities of VLUHR QA, e.g. the involvement in the selection of student panel members, the membership of the Advisory Council and the annual consultation. .

Representatives of universities, colleges of higher education and students are represented in the Advisory Council. These representatives are the most relevant to VLUHR QA; therefore, it is a conscious choice not to expand the Advisory Council with representatives outside the higher education area. Concerning the representation of professional bodies, their presence in the

former Advisory Council (2013-2015) showed little affinity or interest in the activities of VLUHR QA. On the level of the individual assessments, the professional field is involved by means of the professional expertise in each panel. This involvement proves to be effective as VLURH QA has no problem engaging professionals as panel members.

With strategic goals being rolled-out, VLUHR QA focuses more on other stakeholders such as representatives of the institutions without an institutional review and representatives of joint programmes.

13 SWOT analysis

The SWOT analysis is developed in the spring of 2019 by the VLUHR QA staff and the QA Board. The opinions of the stakeholders are used as an input for this analysis.

Strengths

- VLUHR QA is a small, learning and agile organisation whose employees are dynamic and self-managing. They have a rich mix of knowledge, experience and tradition in Flemish higher education.
- VLUHR QA is active on the Flemish and European forum and is closely monitoring new developments in the field of quality assurance. It can rely on an extensive network.
- VLUHR QA enjoys the support of the VLUHR Board and the stakeholders.
- VLUHR QA shares its offices with VLIR, VLHORA and EURASHE, so that it is and remains informed of recent developments.
- VLUHR QA has a unique position as the only Flemish quality assurance agency. It has the best knowledge of the Flemish higher education landscape and has extensive experience in working with Flemish HE institutions and with NVAO.
- VLUHR QA works in a professional way, with clearly elaborated procedures and methodologies. Simultaneously, VLUHR QA pays sufficient attention to customisation.
- The professional working methods lead to great satisfaction among panel members, institutions and study programmes.
- The programmes are being assessed by international panels of experts. The professional field is always involved in these processes. The panels are thoroughly prepared for their task and are always supervised by a project manager/secretary who is not a panel member.
- The approach of an assessment is always to improve the programme. Since 1991, this has been the starting point of external quality assurance in Flanders (enhancement-led, critical friend approach).

Weaknesses

- VLUHR QA is a small organisation which limits the capacity and flexibility of the organisation.
- For a small organisation, it is difficult to follow new, external developments in all domains.
- Active screening of assignments in Europe is a challenge for a small team.
- VLUHR QA has little visibility in the public debate.

Opportunities

- VLUHR QA can deploy its expertise even more outside Flanders and in new domains (e.g. the European Approach, the assessment of the art programmes and the assessment of programmes in the Netherlands).
- VLUHR QA works independently from any government and does not grant accreditation.
- VLUHR QA can position itself even more as a partner and centre of expertise.
- VLUHR QA can raise its profile and focus on PR and marketing (including a new website in Dutch and English).
- Issuing new manuals gives the opportunity to reduce the administrative plan burden and to look for further simplification.

Threats

- VLUHR QA no longer has a statutory role, resulting in uncertainty about the number of assignments. It is difficult to predict when orders will arrive, so it is difficult to draw up a manageable work schedule.
- The quality assurance system in Flanders is multi-layered with different actors. All actors determine the quality assurance policy together.
- Competition from other foreign agencies is possible as they offer a similar service.

14 Current challenges and areas for future development

The changes in the Flemish quality assurance system in 2015 constituted a major threat to the continued existence of VLUHR QA after 2022. At that moment the assessments mandated by decree would come to an end, as a result of which the activities of VLUHR QA would stop.

After a difficult restart, we were able to adjust the course and focus increasingly on the future. New opportunities resulting from the change in the quality assurance system have emerged. In the SAR, we already indicated that the change in decree allowed us to modify various aspects of the manual to be more improvement-oriented and to provide more room for customisation. Moreover, there is an increased focus on improvement-oriented work instead of on accountability. This leads to great satisfaction among the programmes assessed and the panel members.

In addition, the decree change gives opportunities to explore new markets. VLUHR QA is no longer bound by the decree and the Flemish context and can therefore use its expertise on the European forum. As afore-mentioned, we are looking across the border to the Netherlands and we want to play a leading role in the field of programme assessments using the European Approach for Joint Programmes. However, we are well aware that these are major challenges. We will have to focus on brand awareness, making local contexts our own, gaining the trust of institutions... And all this in a European quality assurance landscape that is becoming increasingly complex and competitive.

Nevertheless, we are convinced that with our many years of experience in Flanders and our professional working methods, we can offer added value within these new markets. We also believe that this will be a success. The first successes, especially with regard to the European Approach, have already been demonstrated. We believe that that getting access to these new markets in the coming years, will make VLUHR QA more future proof.

Above all, the changes of the past few years have led to VLUHR QA's working method being even more in line with its own mission and vision aimed at improving the quality of higher education. In recent years, VLUHR QA has been demonstrating that it offers added value in the Flemish higher education landscape more than ever before.

ABBREVIATIONS

AEQES	l'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
INQAAHE	International Network of QA Agencies in Higher Education
IQA	Internal Quality Assurance
MUSIQUE	Music Quality Enhancement
NVAO	Accreditation Organisation for the Netherlands and Flanders
QA	Quality Assurance
SAR	Self-assessment report
SWOT	Strenghts-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	Quality Assurance Unit of the Flemish Council for Higher Education
VVS	Flemish Student Union

APPENDICES

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APPENDIX 1

Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education

The manual is added as a separate booklet to the SAR.

APPENDIX 2

Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

The manual is added as a separate booklet to the SAR.

APPENDIX 3

VLUHR KZ – Complaints procedure

WITH REGARD TO THE COURSE OF THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS, THE CONDUCT OF THE PANEL MEMBERS AND OF THE PROJECT MANAGER / SECRETARY

Context

In accordance with its mission and vision, VLUHR QA aims for quality sound operations. If a programme or institution is dissatisfied with the conduct of the assessment process or with the panel members or project manager / secretary involved in the assessment process, the programme or institution can submit a formal complaint. The following complaints procedure has been developed to this end. The purpose of the procedure is to deal with complaints in an fair and independent manner, without discriminatory consequences for the submitter.

If the dissatisfaction of the programme or institution relates to the formal outcome of the report after the second feedback round, this complaints procedure does not apply. In that case, a complaint can be submitted in accordance with the **Regulations for the internal assessment report appeals procedure**.

Procedure

Definition of a complaint

A complaint means any expression of dissatisfaction or discontent formulated by a programme or institution referring to:

- the course of the assessment process,
- the conduct of panel members,
- the conduct of project managers / secretaries.

The expectations with regard to the assessment process are described in the Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education, August 2015.

The expectations with regard to the conduct of panel members are laid down in the Deontological code and rules of conduct for members of the assessment panel, which is part of the agreement between the VLUHR and panel members, concluded within the framework of an educational assessment.

The expectations with regard to the conduct of project managers / secretaries are laid down in the Deontological code and rules of conduct for project managers / secretaries and in the Deontological code regarding the projects of VLUHR QA.

The following complaints are not eligible:

- Complaints against (the content of) the assessment report;
- Complaints concerning facts having occurred more than six months before the submission of the complaint;
- Complaints that are anonymous.

Filing and registering a complaint

The complaint is submitted in writing by a programme or an institution (the complainant) involved in an assessment process via kwaliteitszorg@vluhr.be stating 'complaint' and it should be addressed to the VLUHR QA Board.

The complaint must contain the following information:

- 1° the name, address, telephone number of the submitter;
- 2° a statement that the rector/general director of the institution supports the complaint;
- 3° the subject of the complaint;
- 4° a factual and documented description of the objections invoked.

A staff member of VLUHR QA who is not involved in the subject of the complaint, handles the complaint. He/she confirms receipt of the complaint within two working days, sends the complaint to the chairman of the VLUHR QA Board and informs the involved parties who are the subject of the complaint.

Handling of the complaint

The chairman of the VLUHR QA Board examines the admissibility of the complaint and communicates his findings to the other members of the VLUHR QA Board.

If the VLUHR QA Board considers the complaint to be inadmissible, it informs the complainant accordingly.

If the VLUHR QA Board finds the complaint to be admissible, it shall examine its legitimacy. To this end, the VLUHR QA Board can call the involved parties for an individual or joint meeting and set place and time of this meeting. Following the meeting, the VLUHR QA Board takes a decision. The parties involved are informed of the decision.

The basic period for handling a complaint is 15 working days (from the date of confirmation of receipt). If more time is needed, this is reported to the complainant.

APPENDIX 4

Follow-up procedure

Context

In accordance with the Higher Education Code, the involved programme is responsible for following up the recommendations of the assessment panel. A formal follow-up of the recommendations only takes place if a standard is judged to be insufficient. The programme must then submit an improvement plan and, on the basis of this plan, the NVAO grants an accreditation for a limited period (2 to 3 years). Before the accreditation expires, the programme must be reassessed for the standards that were deemed insufficient.

A follow-up has been provided within the European Approach for External Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. To this end, VLUHR QA has developed a follow-up procedure. From now on, this procedure applies to the assessments carried out according to the European Approach and as from 2020 to all other assessments.

With the follow-up, VLUHR QA wants to support the quality culture of the programmes, whereby (part of) the assessment panel – as a critical friend – conduct a dialogue with the programme about the developments that have taken place since the assessment.

Procedure

The timing of the follow-up will be agreed upon between the programme/institution and VLUHR QA but is preferably scheduled three years after the publication of the assessment report.

In preparation of the follow-up, the programme will provide information on how it acted upon the recommendations of the assessment panel. The follow-up consists of a meeting between programme managers and a member of the assessment panel, preferably the chairman. This panel member is supported by the project manager of VLUHR QA. During this meeting, programme managers will provide further information on the developments they have been going through since the assessment. The follow-up interview is fully in line with the improvement perspective, in which the programme and the panel enter into a co-creative discussion with each other. The project manager draws up the minutes of the follow-up interview, which is published on the VLUHR QA website.

The follow-up is offered to the programme but the latter can decline. The follow-up does not involve any additional costs for the programme.

Programmes assessed according to the European Approach, which already conduct a consistent follow up at the request of an accreditation organisation, are requested to provide VLUHR QA with the results of these follow up. her resthe results of this follow-up.

APPENDIX 5

Deontologische code en gedragsregels voor projectbegeleiders en secretarissen

- 1 De projectbegeleider/secretaris respecteert de missie van de gevisiteerde instelling en opleiding. Een projectbegeleider/secretaris is zich bewust van zijn of haar rol en vult deze rol in met maximaal respect voor alle commissieleden en gesprekspartners.
- 2 De projectbegeleider/secretaris is geen lid van de commissie en neemt geen oordeel in over de kwaliteit van de opleiding. De projectbegeleider/secretaris uit geen persoonlijke ideeën, overtuigingen of voorkeuren over de opleiding.
- 3 De projectbegeleider/secretaris bewaakt het proces zoals uitgeschreven in de VLUHR-visitatiehandleiding en de gemaakte afspraken met de opleiding en de commissieleden.
- 4 De projectbegeleider/secretaris schrijft het rapport op basis van volgende informatie:
 - het door de opleiding opgestelde zelfevaluatie rapport met de daarbij horende bijlagen en documentatiegegevens;
 - eventuele additionele op verzoek van de commissie aangeleverde gegevens;
 - de gesprekken die in het kader van het visitatiebezoek zijn gevoerd;
 - de waarnemingen van de commissieleden tijdens de bezoeken ter plaatse;
 - de ingevulde beoordelingsformulieren van de commissieleden.
- 5 De projectbegeleider/secretaris gebruikt informatie die in het kader van de visitatie en de beoordeling is vergaard, enkel voor het omstellen van het visitatierapport. Alle informatie wordt vertrouwelijk behandeld.
- 6 De projectbegeleider/secretaris aanvaardt geen geschenken of beloningen van een te visiteren opleiding of een bij de visitatie betrokken instelling/persoon.
- 7 De projectbegeleider/secretaris heeft geen financiële, commerciële of andere persoonlijke belangen bij de te beoordelen opleiding of de instelling.
8. De projectbegeleider/secretaris neemt de deontologische code projectwerking in acht.

APPENDIX 6

Deontologische code projectwerking VLUHR KZ

Na de hervorming van de kwaliteitszorgsystematiek in Vlaanderen, besliste de VLUHR RvB op 28 mei 2015 tot de continuering van de activiteiten van de Cel Kwaliteitszorg binnen VLUHR met inbegrip van aanvullende opdrachten. De Cel Kwaliteitszorg kreeg aldus de opdracht de decretaal voorziene visitatieactiviteiten aan te vullen met opdrachten die ze verwerft op de markt.

De Cel Kwaliteitszorg is belast met:

- de coördinatie en organisatie van visitaties van opleidingen in herstel; nieuwe opleidingen; internationale gezamenlijke opleidingen, opleidingen van geregistreerde instellingen, van de instellingen van openbaar nut voor post-initieel onderwijs, wetenschappelijk onderzoek en wetenschappelijke dienstverlening, en van de erkende faculteiten der protestantse godgeleerdheid;
- het verwerven en uitvoeren van projecten/consultancy opdrachten binnen 1. de hoger onderwijsinstellingen in Vlaanderen; 2. andere organisaties (andere onderwijsinstellingen in binnen- en buitenland, bedrijven, organisaties en overheidsdiensten betrokken bij het aanbieden van vormingstrajecten en opleidingen); 3. binnen- en buitenlandse partnerorganisaties.

Alle medewerkers van de Cel Kwaliteitszorg voeren zowel visitaties als projecten/consultancy opdrachten uit en zijn in beide gevallen verantwoordelijk voor de kwaliteitsvolle uitvoering van de hen toegewezen visitaties / projecten/consultancy opdrachten. De projecten worden verdeeld op basis van taakspecialisaties (verdeling naar kennis en vaardigheden/doelgroep/soort dienstverlening).

Deontologische code

Het is voor VLUHR KZ belangrijk dat in haar werking geen (schijn van) belangenvermenging kan ontstaan. Daartoe wordt een deontologische code opgesteld die door het Bestuurscomité Kwaliteitszorg werd bekrachtigd op [datum]. Alle medewerkers van VLUHR KZ dienen zich met deze deontologische code akkoord te verklaren en deze steeds te respecteren.

VLUHR KZ kiest hierbij niet voor een artificiële opdeling van haar organisatie in een visitatie- en projectenpoot. Wel kiest VLUHR KZ voor een deontologische attitude die haar en haar medewerkers wapent tegen een (schijn van) belangenvermenging en stelt daarom:

- VLUHR KZ gebruikt haar erkenning door EQAR alleen voor de visitaties.
- Een medewerker van VLUHR KZ die een project uitvoert bij (een opleiding van) een instelling zal tot twee jaar na de afronding van het project niet betrokken worden bij visitaties aan de instelling
- Een medewerker van VLUHR KZ die een visitatie uitvoert bij een opleiding van een instelling zal tot twee jaar na de visitatie niet betrokken worden bij een project aan de instelling.
- Medewerkers van VLUHR KZ die in eenzelfde instelling respectievelijk een visitatie dan wel een project uitvoeren, hebben geen inzage in elkaars werk.
- Informatie verkregen uit de projecten wordt niet meegenomen in de visitaties.

VLUHR KZ staat voor betrokkenheid, deskundigheid, onafhankelijkheid, transparantie, billijkheid en verbeteringsgericht werken.

APPENDIX 7

Governance VLUHR Kwaliteitszorg

Het Bestuurscomité Kwaliteitszorg en de Cel Kwaliteitszorg vormen samen het kwaliteitszorgagentschap van de VLUHR.

VLUHR KZ 2.0 is belast met het uitvoeren van de decretale opdracht op het vlak van externe kwaliteitszorg onderwijs én aanvullende marktactiviteiten. Het Bestuurscomité stuurt VLUHR KZ 2.0 aan, de Cel Kwaliteitszorg staat in voor de dagelijkse werking, rapporteert aan het Bestuurscomité en ondersteunt dit.

Bevoegdheden en verdeling van taken

Decretale opdrachten

Krachtens de Codex hoger Onderwijs (Art. II.37 §2) is de VLUHR bevoegd voor de externe kwaliteitsbeoordelingen in de instellingen zoals bepaald in artikel II. 122. De statuten van de VLUHR bepalen dat de vereniging deze bevoegdheid kan delegeren aan een zelfstandige entiteit. In deze context en in functie van de autonomie ten aanzien van de betrokken instellingen (European Standards and Guidelines) mandateert de Raad van Bestuur van VLUHR de bevoegdheden met betrekking tot de decretale opdrachten aan het Bestuurscomité van VLUHR KZ 2.0.

Het Bestuurscomité Kwaliteitszorg is bevoegd voor de opvolging van de concrete uitvoering van de visitaties van opleidingen in herstel; nieuwe opleidingen; internationale gezamenlijke opleidingen, opleidingen van geregistreerde instellingen, van de instellingen van openbaar nut voor post-initieel onderwijs, wetenschappelijk onderzoek en wetenschappelijke dienstverlening, en van de erkende faculteiten der protestantse godgeleerdheid²⁶ en de conformiteit ervan met het visitatieprotocol en voor de bekrachtiging en samenstelling van de visitatiecommissies.

De Cel Kwaliteitszorg is belast met de coördinatie en organisatie van deze visitaties.

Aanvullende marktopdrachten

Ook voor de marktactiviteiten moet VLUHR KZ 2.0 voldoen aan de eisen van ENQA en EQAR, waaronder onafhankelijkheid. De RvB VLUHR kan geen betrokken partij zijn bij projecten in het hoger onderwijs, zeker niet bij projecten van de leden van VLUHR, die in sommige gevallen vertrouwelijk zijn.

²⁶ Opleidingen van hoger onderwijsinstellingen die bij de instellingsreview geen bijkomende beoordeling vragen van de manier waarop de instelling de regie voert van de borging van de kwaliteit van haar opleidingen behoren ook tot de decretale opdracht, maar komen in de realiteit niet voor aangezien alle instellingen kozen voor de IR+

In deze context mandateert de Raad van Bestuur van VLUHR de bevoegdheden met betrekking tot marktopdrachten aan het Bestuurscomité van VLUHR KZ 2.0.

Het Bestuurscomité Kwaliteitszorg is bevoegd om volgende marktopdrachten goed te keuren: projecten/consultancy binnen 1. de hoger onderwijsinstellingen in Vlaanderen; 2. Andere organisaties betrokken bij het aanbieden van vormingstrajecten en opleidingen (o.a. andere onderwijsinstellingen in binnen- en buitenland, organisaties en overheidsdiensten); 3. Binnen- en buitenlandse partnerorganisaties. Het Bestuurscomité is tevens bevoegd voor de opvolging van de voortgang van aanvullende opdrachten en voor het opnemen van een actieve rol in marktopdrachten (bv. deelname als externe experts bij beoordelingen van opleidingen binnen eigen regie van de instellingen)

De Cel Kwaliteitszorg is belast met het verwerven en uitvoeren van marktopdrachten. VLUHR KZ 2.0 heeft informatieplicht ten aanzien van de RvB VLUHR.

De Raad van Bestuur VLUHR blijft bevoegd voor de goedkeuring van marktactiviteiten met binnen- en buitenlandse niet aan onderwijs gerelateerde instellingen.

Algemene opdrachten

- Externe vertegenwoordiging bij organisaties zoals ENQA, INQAAHE, EQAR,...;
- Advisering richting hoger onderwijs instellingen en bijdragen aan de ontwikkeling van de kwaliteits(zorg)cultuur in het Hoger onderwijs in Vlaanderen.

Voor de uitvoering van haar opdrachten is VLUHR KZ 2.0 verantwoordelijk voor de bestedingen binnen een jaarlijks door de Algemene Vergadering van VLUHR goedgekeurde begroting.

Organisatie VLUHR KZ 2.0

Bestuurscomité Kwaliteitszorg

Het Bestuurscomité Kwaliteitszorg bestaat uit vier gezaghebbende experts. De leden zetelen als experts en zijn niet in enige dienstbetrekking bij een instellingen voor hoger onderwijs in Vlaanderen.

De leden beschikken samen over volgende kennis en ervaring:

- a. kennis van interne/externe kwaliteitszorg (in het hoger onderwijs);
- b. voeling met het hoger onderwijs in Vlaanderen;
- c. internationale ervaring;
- d. ervaring met projectwerking

Cel Kwaliteitszorg

Interne organisatie

De interne organisatie van de Cel gebeurt in functie van de doelmatigheid van het werk en van de ervaring en specialisatie van de medewerkers. De coördinatoren zijn verantwoordelijk voor de dagelijkse leiding van de Cel Kwaliteitszorg. Alle medewerkers van de Cel Kwaliteitszorg voeren zowel visitaties als marktopdrachten uit en zijn in beide gevallen verantwoordelijk voor de kwaliteitsvolle uitvoering van de hen toegewezen visitaties / marktopdrachten. Projecten worden verdeeld op basis van taakspecialisaties (verdeling naar kennis en vaardigheden/doelgroep/soort dienstverlening). Voor de uitvoering van de visitaties zijn de werkprocessen en –inhoud ‘gestandaardiseerd’ via de handleiding en het intern draaiboek.

Personeelsomvang

Om alle visitaties zelf te coördineren en te begeleiden en marktopdrachten te kunnen uitvoeren, is op het vlak van personeelsinzet nood aan flexibiliteit. De match tussen de vaste personeelskern van de Cel en de kernopdrachten wordt zo maximaal mogelijk gehouden, maar het moet mogelijk zijn om voor de opdrachten personeel op freelance basis / projectbasis aan te trekken.

Omvang en kost van het personeel blijven binnen de begrotingsafspraken. De opbrengsten van de marktactiviteiten kunnen mee de overhead van de vloer en de kostprijs voor het personeel opvangen.

Betrokkenheid stakeholders

De stakeholders worden bij de decretale opdrachten van VLUHR KZ 2.0 betrokken via een in omvang beperkte overleggroep met adviserende bevoegdheid.

De beperkte overleggroep wordt samengesteld uit:

- één vertegenwoordiger van de hogescholen te benoemen door VLHORA
- één vertegenwoordiger van de universiteiten te benoemen door VLIR
- één vertegenwoordiger van VVS

APPENDIX 8

Strategic plan for the future of VLUHR QA as an ENQA- and EQAR-registered agency.

Introduction

As a result of the decree change of 2015, VLUHR QA has diversified its activities. In addition to its statutory assignments (assessments) in accordance with the ESG, VLUHR QA carries out assignments that mainly focus on quality assurance in higher education. VLUHR QA uses a clear distinction between both types of assignments, in accordance with the relevant EQAR requirements. The future assignments that VLUHR QA wants to carry out within the scope of the ESG, are described below.

Assessment of programmes

Programme assessment at Flemish universities and universities of applied sciences and arts

Until 2022, a number of programmes are required to participate in an assessment coordinated by VLUHR QA. These are new programmes, programmes that are considered as being accredited in the framework of a European funding programme and programmes with a limited accreditation period (in an improvement trajectory).

In addition, Flemish universities and universities of applied sciences and arts can call upon VLUHR QA for the assessment of all their programmes. These are assessed in accordance with the ESG and the quality code defined by NVAO. To this end, VLUHR QA is developing a new manual that fits in with the Flemish universities and universities of applied sciences and arts own quality assurance system 'eigen regie'.

Programme assessments in the field of arts

The specificity of the arts programmes means that they do not always fit perfectly into the institutions' 'eigen regie'. In consultation with Flemish arts programmes, VLUHR QA will draw up a manual for external assessment in accordance with the ESG and the quality code defined by NVAO.

Programme assessments at non-statutory registered institutions

For non-statutory registered institutions that do not undergo an institutional review, the system of programme assessment will be maintained. These institutions in Flanders can freely choose to call upon an EQAR-registered quality assurance agency. Most of these institutions resort to the services of VLUHR QA. In consultation with these institutions and NVAO, VLUHR QA will draw up a manual for the evaluation of the programmes in registered institutions.

Programme assessments according to the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

The Flemish government is an advocate of the European Approach for the quality assurance of joint programmes (EA). As from 2019, all new joint programmes in Flemish higher education will be evaluated using this system. Since 2018, VLUHR QA has been an active partner in the implementation of the EA. VLUHR QA has designed a manual for this purpose. This manual describes the assessment protocol used by VLUHR QA and is intended for both study programmes and institutions as well as panel members.

VLUHR QA will also advertise itself on the foreign market. In this respect, VLUHR QA will also be able to act as a contact for programmes that do not have a Flemish partner.

Programme assessments in foreign institutions

VLUHR QA wants to further develop its activities in higher education abroad. In the first place, VLUHR QA aims at the Dutch higher education market. VLUHR QA will draw up a manual for this purpose. The staff members of VLUHR QA have completed the NVAO training for secretaries (required in the Netherlands). VLUHR QA already has experience in the Netherlands with TNO's (Toets Nieuw Opleiding) and preliminary pilot assessments.

