

## Programme reviews in Flanders

### The first steps

The 1980s saw a growing interest in quality assurance in higher education, both within Europe and in the Flemish higher education landscape. Before the early 1990s, there was hardly any systematic or formalised approach either by the government or institutions, although quality had long been on the agenda of universities and universities of applied sciences (and arts). As a result, there were few formal guarantees of educational quality. Rather, quality was seen as a natural consequence of the efforts of individuals and, in particular, of the teacher.

However, the late 1980s and early 1990s were a pivotal moment for quality assurance in higher education. During that period, so-called "internal quality assurance" began to develop. Higher education institutions started to pay more attention to thorough self-evaluation to monitor the quality of their programmes. In Flanders, universities and universities of applied sciences (and arts) took the initiative to set up internal quality assurance systems, partly with the intention of gaining more autonomy from the government.

### Flemish visitations

After the third state reform, the three Belgian communities became responsible for education. From 1991, the Flemish government demanded, first for universities and later for universities of applied sciences (and arts), a more systematic approach to quality assurance.<sup>1</sup> This took the form of programme reviews, which were called 'visitations'. Here, not only the programme is responsible for its own quality evaluation, but an independent panel of external experts or peers also assesses the quality of education (and research). This process is called 'external quality assurance'.

From the very beginning of these programme reviews, the focus has been on quality improvement. The importance of the results of the reviews is determined by the authority of the panel, which consists of peers with knowledge of both the academic and professional fields. The panel conducts interviews with stakeholders of the programme and concludes its work with the publication of a public report, which focuses on opportunities for improvement.

The programme reviews were carried out in a comparative perspective, meaning that a panel visited and assessed a cluster of similar programmes at different institutions in the same time frame. The findings were also presented in this comparative perspective so that programmes could learn from each other.

Ownership of and responsibility for the organisation of these external quality assurance processes was given to the institutions themselves. The coordination of the visitations came into the hands of the umbrella bodies of the universities and universities of applied sciences (and arts), respectively the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR) and the Council of Flemish Universities of Applied Sciences and Arts (VLHORA). The whole system was supervised by the government, which evaluated the quality assurance of the universities and universities of applied sciences (and arts) and to what extent they incorporated the results of the quality assessment into their policies.

A perceived disadvantage of a system that relies heavily on trust and quality improvement is the lack of sanctions or reward mechanisms when external evaluation results are (not) translated into improvement measures. A shift therefore took place towards a system that offered stronger guarantees for the follow-up of areas for improvement that emerged from the programme reviews.

### Perspective on improvement and accountability, as well as accreditation

In 2003, the Netherlands and Flanders signed a treaty for a joint accreditation organisation: the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO). The external quality assurance system now included accreditation.<sup>2</sup> In Flanders, the choice was made to join the Dutch accreditation system. To this end, regulations

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<sup>1</sup> A system of external quality assurance has been operational at Flemish universities since 1991. For the universities of applied sciences (and arts), it was introduced in 1995, following the large-scale merger operation then taking place.

<sup>2</sup> In the most generic sense, accreditation is a process that can be described as a formal public statement - made by an independent body and based on a quality review - that specific pre-agreed standards are being achieved.

were aligned as much as possible. With the introduction of accreditation, Flanders also joined the European trends of the time.

After signing the treaty, a three-layer system started from 2005: self-evaluation by the institution, external evaluation through programme reviews by VLIR or VLHORA, and accreditation by NVAO. In addition to the continued focus on improvement, from then on, the programme reviews also emphasised accountability. That is, a panel no longer expressed its findings solely in terms of strengths and weaknesses, but assessed the programs on six topics: objectives, programme, staff, facilities, internal quality assurance, and results. These topics were further shaped into facets and criteria. A programme had to score satisfactory on all subjects to be accredited.

### From cooperation to integration

Respecting the cultural differences between universities and universities of applied sciences (and arts), the quality assurance units of VLIR and VLHORA worked together according to a jointly established procedure for programme reviews. On 1 July 1 2008, both organisations moved to a shared office space in the Ravenstein Gallery in Brussels. At the same time, the Flemish Minister of Education advocated that the co-location should lead to an integration of the two organisations: the task was given to establish the Flemish Higher Education Council (VLUHR). Among other things, VLUHR was given specific decretal responsibility to coordinate external quality assurance procedures. The two quality assurance units continued their work in 2011 under the name VLUHR Quality Assurance, abbreviated VLUHR QA. In 2013, the units were merged into one organisation.

### Programme reviews and institutional reviews

By 2013, all existing programmes had gone through the programme review procedure with accreditation at least once, in most cases this was already the second or third programme review. All stakeholders expressed a desire for a new quality assurance system in which, in addition to a programme review, there would be an institutional review<sup>3</sup> at universities and the universities of applied sciences (and arts).

While VLUHR QA continued to focus on programme reviews, NVAO was given the decretal authority to coordinate institutional reviews. With the advent of the institutional review, the scope of programme reviews started to focus on the educational processes of the programme itself. The six subjects and 21 facets in the review system were reduced to four standards: targeted outcome level, educational learning environment, outcome level achieved and quality assurance.

The next round of programme reviews began in 2013, while the first institutional reviews would be carried out from 2015. However, the combination of institutional reviews and programme reviews was considered too heavy in terms of workload by all stakeholders. The general concern was that quality assurance would suffer rather than benefit. Stakeholders from universities and universities of applied sciences (and arts) indicated that there was room for simplification in this system.

### Own conduct

As a result of the decree amendment of 10 June 2015, an extended institutional review was opted for, in which an institution undergoes an additional review of how the institution will handle the quality assurance of its programmes. As a transitional measure, the accreditation of programmes at each university and university of applied sciences (and arts) was extended by eight years. However, this exemption did not apply to new programmes, programmes accredited on the basis of selection under a European funding programme, and programmes with limited accreditation duration. For these programmes, the system of programme reviews was maintained, as well as for programmes of registered institutions (without institutional review).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Institutional review is a periodic review by an external panel, targeting policy processes set up by a higher education institution to ensure that it is carrying out its educational missions in a qualitative manner. The review panel also includes the policy processes established by the institution to support education, research and contributions to society for each programme.

<sup>4</sup> <https://onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/nl/directies-en-administraties/hoger-onderwijs/contactinfo-hoger-onderwijs/instellingen-en-organisaties#geregistreerde-instellingen>.

## Relaunch of VLUHR QA

The 2015 decision immediately led to a drastic reduction in the number of programme reviews for VLUHR QA. The methodology for these reviews remained the same, except for some optimisations. The impact on the organisation of VLUHR QA was greater. Some staff felt that the accumulated expertise within VLUHR QA should not be lost, but should be at the service of higher education institutions in supporting their quality assurance processes as an external partner. These staff members provided a relaunch of VLUHR QA with programme reviews on the one hand and support for institutions and programmes that do not require external programme reviews on the other.

## From experiment to quality culture

While universities and universities of applied sciences (and arts) underwent an initial institutional review that served as a baseline, a new wind was blowing in the direction of programme reviews ([link to Dutch article](#)). Reviews no longer took place in clusters, increasing the openness of programmes. Moreover, the administration of the review process was greatly reduced and VLUHR QA committed to tailor-made programme reviews.

From 2019, the criteria for programme reviews have changed. The system with four review standards has been replaced by eight criteria that have been refined based on the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG).<sup>5</sup> Evaluation is done holistically through a pass/fail system where criteria are not assessed separately. It is therefore up to the external panels to strongly substantiate in the reports the elements of appreciation and recommendation that lead to the judgment on quality. In addition, VLUHR QA committed to the mid-term follow-up of programme reviews.

Since 2018, VLUHR QA has been one of the pioneers in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) conducting programme reviews according to the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes framework.<sup>6</sup> Review through this system is mandatory for certain programmes in Flemish higher education and is recognised in several countries of the EHEA.

In 2022, VLUHR QA conducted the last decree-mandated programme reviews (formerly called visitations) of programmes at the universities and the universities of applied sciences (and arts). These were reassessments of programmes that scored unsatisfactory on one or more standards of the assessment framework during a previous review. The last of these decree-mandated programme reviews took place for the professional bachelor's programmes in Nursing. Since then, VLUHR QA has focused on programme reviews at registered institutions, voluntary programme reviews at universities and universities of applied sciences (and arts), as well as mandatory and voluntary programme reviews according to the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programs in Flanders and beyond.

## Expertise centre for quality assurance

VLUHR QA is a quality assurance agency that, as an evaluation body and expertise centre, promotes quality assurance and quality development in higher education. In recent years, the expertise centre has become increasingly important within the activities of VLUHR QA. Since many institutions and programmes do not have mandatory programme reviews, VLUHR QA takes on a supporting role in some instances - at the request of the institutions themselves. VLUHR QA has become a prominent player in the higher education field in terms of quality assurance methodologies and processes.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.enqa.eu/esg-standards-and-guidelines-for-quality-assurance-in-the-european-higher-education-area/>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.qualityassurance.vluhr.be/files/Manual-European-Approach.pdf>.