
ENQA AGENCY REVIEW: FLEMISH HIGHER EDUCATION COUNCIL - QUALITY ASSURANCE (VLUHR QA)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report analyses to what extent the Quality Assurance Unit of the Flemish Higher Education Council (VLUHR QA) complies with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). It is based on an ENQA-coordinated external review conducted as part of VLUHR QA's application for renewal of ENQA membership and registration on the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). The review was carried out between March 2018 and September 2019, with a site visit to Brussels, Belgium between 10 and 12 June 2019.

The panel found VLUHR QA's level of alignment with the ESG standards is the following:

- Fully compliant with the following ESG standards – 3.2, 3.3, 3.6, 3.7, 2.2, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6, 2.7
- Substantially compliant with the following ESG standards – 3.1, 3.5, 2.1, 2.3,
- Partially compliant with the following ESG standards – 3.4.

The quality assurance system for higher education in Flanders has undergone significant changes since 2015 when a new decree came into force. The decree affected the scope and amount of VLUHR QA's activities. This subsequently led to consolidation of resources – decrease in the available funding and reduced number of staff members.

Currently VLUHR QA is responsible for 1) assessments of new programmes, 2) programmes that had a reduced period of accreditation, 3) international joint programmes as well as for 4) assessments of all study programmes in institutions that are not subject to an institutional review.

The scope of responsibilities of VLUHR QA will significantly decrease in 2022 when the activities of VLUHR QA mandated by law will come to an end. VLUHR QA has made an effort to address the challenges in its strategic plan.

The panel would like to underline that for VLUHR QA's compliance with the ESG standards the current state of operation is assessed. The panel did not assess the sustainability of VLUHR QA in aspects that do not affect VLUHR QA's compliance with the ESG at the moment.

Overall, the panel concludes that VLUHR QA is a well-functioning agency which benefits from a high level of trust from the higher education institutions in Flanders. VLUHR QA was historically formed by a merger of two representative organisations of higher education institutions, therefore it is perceived as a partner rather than a regulating organisation.

Nevertheless, the panel has identified some areas for improvement that are further addressed in the report.

The panel hopes that its analyses and recommendations will support VLUHR QA in its continued efforts to serve the higher education community in Flanders and abroad.

INTRODUCTION

This report analyses the compliance of the Quality Assurance Unit of the Flemish Higher Education Council (*Vlaamse Universiteiten en Hogescholen Raad Kwaliteitszorg*, VLUHR QA) with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG). It is based on an external review conducted in March 2019 – August 2019.

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW AND OUTLINE OF THE REVIEW PROCESS

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW

ENQA's regulations require all member agencies to undergo an external cyclical review, at least once every five years, in order to verify that they act in substantial compliance with the ESG as adopted at the Yerevan ministerial conference of the Bologna Process in 2015.

As this is VLUHR QA second review, the panel is expected to provide clear evidence of results in all areas and to acknowledge progress from the previous review. The panel has adopted a developmental approach, as the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* aim at constant enhancement of the agencies.

The Terms of Reference (ToR) for the review identified the following activities of VLUHR QA to be addressed during the review:

- assessments of new study programmes;
- assessments of joint study programmes;
- assessments of programmes in an improvement process of universities and university colleges;
- programme assessments of registered institutions.

MAIN FINDINGS OF THE 2014 REVIEW

VLUHR QA underwent its previous ENQA-coordinated review in 2014 with the review report published on January 2015. The conclusion of the review panel was the following:

- **ESG 2.1 (Use of internal quality assurance procedures): full compliance**
- **ESG 2.2 (Development of external quality assurance processes): full compliance**
- **ESG 2.3 (Criteria for decisions): full compliance**
- **ESG 2.4 (Processes fit for purpose): full compliance**
 - o To keep under close review with their funders the operation of the subject Panels in terms of their strength and depth and overall capacity to undertake their designated role
- **ESG 2.5 (Reporting): full compliance**
- **ESG 2.6 (Follow-up procedures): substantial compliance**
 - o For the responsible Flemish bodies to consider whether full responsibility for consideration of follow-up of reports should rest primarily with VLUHR QA as part of a more structured and transparent process
- **ESG 2.7 (Periodic reviews): full compliance**
- **ESG 2.8 (System-wide analysis): partial compliance**

- To consider how the outputs from its review activities can be further focused to support system-wide analysis and institutional quality improvement and enhancement;
- To discuss with its stakeholders' options to increase VLUHR QA's 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
- **ENQA criterion 1 cont./ ESG 3.1: Use of external quality assurance procedures for higher education: substantial compliance**
- **ENQA criterion 2/ ESG 3.2: Official status: full compliance**
- **ENQA criterion 1 cont./ ESG 3.3: full compliance**
 - To position itself at the centre of the debate in Flanders on future approaches to quality assurance; 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 the 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 that VLUHR QA position itself in the centre of this debate with Government and HE stakeholders; it has much valuable experience and insight to offer in the debate.
- **ENQA criterion 3/ ESG 3.4: Resources: substantial compliance**
 - To complete the full merger of staff into the new organisation as soon as possible.
- **ENQA criterion 4/ ESG 3.5: Mission statement: full compliance**
- **ENQA criterion 5/ ESG 3.6: Independence: substantial compliance**
 - To consider strengthening the involvement of students and representatives of industry and professional bodies in its governance arrangements as its stakeholder profile outside the higher education sector is limited
- **ENQA criterion 6/ ESG 3.7: External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies: full compliance**
- **ENQA criterion 7/ ESG 3.8: Accountability procedures: full compliance**
- **ENQA criterion 8/ Consistency of judgements, appeals system and contribution to ENQA aims: full compliance**

The ENQA Board in its membership confirmation letter endorsed all the recommendations formulated by the panel.

The EQAR Register Committee emphasised the following issues as flagged for future reviews:

- the lack of follow up procedures developed and performed by VLUHR QA between periodical assessments (ESG 2.6. and 3.7)
- sufficiency and sustainability of resources for implementing its activities (ESG 3.4.)

The EQAR Register Committee also admitted that the previously flagged issue of independence (ESG 3.6) was addressed but noted that there is a need to strengthen involvement of stakeholders in VLUHR QA's work.

REVIEW PROCESS

The 2019 external review of VLUHR QA was conducted in line with the process described in the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* and in accordance with the timeline set out in the Terms of Reference. The panel for the external review of VLUHR QA was appointed by ENQA and composed of the following members:

- Stephen Jackson (Chair), Director Assessment, Research & Evaluation Associates Ltd., former Director of Reviews, Quality Assurance Agency, United Kingdom (Quality assurance professional, ENQA nominee);
- Asnate Kažoka (Secretary), Expert, Quality Agency for Higher Education, Academic Information Centre, Latvia (Quality assurance professional, ENQA nominee);
- Bernard Coulie, Full Professor and Honorary Rector, Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgium (Academic, EUA nominee);
- Mykyta Yevstifejev, Master student in Public Administration, Kyiv School of Economics, Ukraine (ESU nominee).

Goran Dakovic, ENQA Reviews Manager, acted as review coordinator.

VLUHR QA had produced a self-assessment report which provided sufficient evidence for drawing preliminary conclusions. The panel used the opportunity to request a number of additional documents to clarify several points at issue. The site visit conducted by the panel was used to fully validate the self-assessment report and discuss the perspectives of different stakeholders. Based on the self-assessment report, site visit and the additional materials provided by the VLUHR QA the review panel produced its final report.

The review panel confirms that it was given access to all documents that were requested. A large extent of documentation was available in Dutch and the panel member with knowledge of Dutch analysed it and shared his findings.

Self-assessment report

The self-assessment report (SAR) was the result of a collaborative effort of the VLUHR QA staff and the QA Board. The report was produced between spring 2018 and spring 2019. All VLUHR QA staff members took part in production of the report. Report drafts were discussed by the QA Board and the final version was approved by the QA Board in March 2019. The SWOT analysis was developed by VLUHR QA staff, QA Board together with external stakeholders.

The SAR was very informative and analytic. It provided a good insight in the VLUHR QA's internal discussions and the issues discussed with stakeholders and allowed the panel to understand the justification for different strategic decisions made by VLUHR QA. However, providing more statistical and graphical information in the report would have been useful for clarifying the dynamics of different processes before requesting additional information.

Site visit

The site visit took place from June 10th to June 12th, 2019 in the VLUHR Offices in Brussels, Belgium. As June 10th is a public holiday in Belgium, on this date only the internal meeting of the panel and an introductory meeting with VLUHR QA staff were held. The majority of meetings were held on 11th June. Throughout the day the panel had a chance to meet diverse stakeholders involved or related to

the VLUHR QA's work. The representatives met by the panel were open and willing to engage in the discussions and provided a detailed overview of the VLUHR QA's role in national context and its activities.

The interviewed stakeholders represented:

- VLUHR QA staff (also the team responsible for drafting the SAR),
- VLUHR QA Board,
- VLUHR QA Advisory Council,
- VLUHR Board,
- Flemish Students Union,
- Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders,
- Representatives of reviewed study programmes,
- Members of review panels.

The panel used the opportunity to clarify pending issues with VLUHR QA staff twice after the initial meeting with the staff. All VLUHR QA staff members were also present during the session where preliminary conclusions were shared. A full list of meetings including the names of the interviewees is available in Annex 1 of this report.

The panel would like to thank VLUHR QA's staff for their commitment and availability despite holidays and for the excellent preparatory work done prior to the site visit. The panel appreciated the high quality of the documentation provided by the VLUHR QA.

The panel would like to express its sincere gratitude to VLUHR QA's liaison person Klara de Wilde for her positive attitude and support and for accommodating all the requests made by the panel. The panel would also like to thank the ENQA Reviews Manager Goran Dakovic for his invaluable support during the review process and for additional explanations in order to ensure consistency of the reviews.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM OF THE AGENCY

HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

VLUHR QA predominantly operates in the Belgian Flemish Community which is one of the three Autonomous Communities of the Belgian federal state.

There are two types of higher education institutions operating in the Belgian Flemish Community – statutory registered institutions (universities, universities of applied sciences and arts, institutes for post-initial education, Evangelische Theologische Faculteit and the Faculteit voor Protestantse Godgeleerdheid) and non-statutory institutions.

The statutory registered institutions cater for over 99% of higher education students in Flanders and Brussels.

The higher education institutions in the Belgian Flemish Community can offer five types of study programmes:

- Associate degree programmes (EQF level 5);
- Professional bachelor study programmes (EQF level 6);
- Academic bachelor study programmes (EQF level 6);
- Master programmes (EQF level 7);

- Doctoral programmes (EQF level 8).

The majority of study programmes in Flanders are delivered in Dutch and strict language regulations are in place for the use of other languages.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

The system for external quality assurance of higher education in Flanders was established in 1991 with the introduction of programme assessments performed by the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR). The programme assessments for universities of applied sciences and arts were established by the Flemish Council of Universities of Applied Sciences and Arts (VLHORA) in 2000. In 2010 a merger of VLIR and VLHORA into VLUHR took place and in 2013 the establishment of a joint quality assurance unit (VLUHR QA) was completed.

Until 2004 the system focused primarily on quality improvement. From 2003 to 2013 an accreditation decision by the Independent Accreditation Organisation for the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) was added and assessments became more focused on accountability. In 2013 a new round of assessments was initiated during which programme assessments were combined with institutional reviews. However, the decree change in 2015 offered the higher education institutions the possibility to choose between institutional review by NVAO combined with programme assessments by VLUHR QA and an extensive institutional review (including assessment of the procedures for internal programme assessments “eigen regie”¹) by NVAO. All universities and universities of applied sciences and arts chose the extensive institutional review.

Between 2016 and 2017 a pilot of institutional reviews was organised by NVAO and outcomes of these pilot reviews were used as an input for the new accreditation system that will come into force in September 2019.

The new system prescribes that universities and universities of applied sciences and arts will have to undergo an institutional review every 6 years. This institutional review will also include the assessment of internal procedures (eigen regie). New study programmes and joint study programmes will still be subject to programme assessments.

For the institutions that are not subject to an institutional review the current system with programme assessment and accreditation will still be in place.

QUALITY ASSURANCE UNIT OF THE FLEMISH HIGHER EDUCATION COUNCIL

VLUHR QA was established as an independent entity of the Flemish Higher Education Council (VLUHR) which was formed after the merger of the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR) and the Flemish Council of Universities of Applied Sciences and Arts (VLHORA). The merger took place in December 2010.

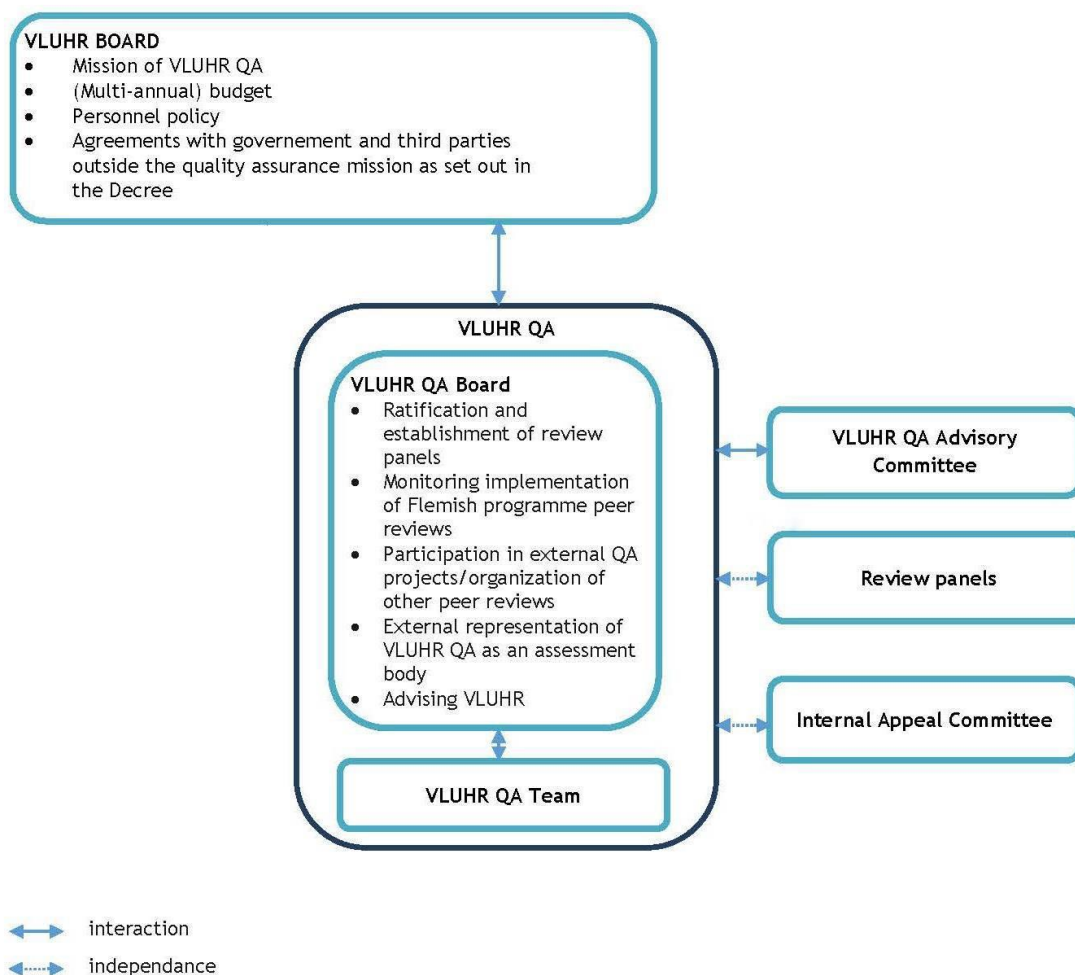
VLUHR QA was established by merging the quality assurance units of both VLIR and VLHORA. In 2014, the quality assurance staff of both former units was fully legally integrated into VLUHR QA.

¹ Evaluation of the manner how universities and universities of applied sciences and arts are able to safeguard the quality of their programmes.

VLUHR QA'S ORGANISATION/STRUCTURE

VLUHR QA functions as an independent entity of VLUHR.

The governing structure of VLUHR QA is demonstrated in the organisational chart below:



VLUHR QA is governed by the QA Board which consists of four members (independent international experts) that are appointed by the VLUHR Board based on the nomination of the VLUHR QA staff and the QA Board. The term of the office for the QA Board is 2 years and the mandate of board members can be extended indefinitely each time for the same period. VLUHR QA Board is responsible for ratification and establishment of review panels, monitoring implementation of Flemish programme peer reviews, participation in external quality assurance projects, external representation of VLUHR QA and advising VLUHR.

VLUHR Board is composed of rectors, presidents and chairs of the associations chosen and appointed by the VLUHR General Assembly. VLUHR Board takes decisions related to VLUHR QA's personnel and finances. VLUHR Board also approves the mission of VLUHR QA.

The communication between VLUHR Board and VLUHR QA is organised by the two VLUHR Secretary Generals.

Stakeholders are represented in the VLUHR QA Advisory council. It consists of a representative of the universities (proposed by VLIR), representative of the universities of applied sciences and arts (proposed by VLHORA) and representative of Flemish Students Union. The Advisory council discusses matters related to the external quality assurance policy and the assessment procedures of VLUHR QA.

VLUHR QA has established a permanent Appeals Committee with 4 members. The Appeals Committee is appointed by the QA Board based on the nomination of VLUHR QA. The Appeals Committee works independently and communicates its decision to the institution which has submitted appeal and to the chair of the review panel involved.

VLUHR QA'S FUNCTIONS, ACTIVITIES, PROCEDURES

According to the decree of the Flemish government change in 2015 VLUHR QA is mandated to perform the following assessments 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).

VLUHR QA is also mandated to perform programme assessments of institutions that are not subject to an institutional review (non-statutory registered institutions).

VLUHR QA does not take any formal decisions. The higher education institutions can submit the assessment reports for decision by NVAO.

VLUHR QA performs its activities according to manuals – Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education and Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.

Given the fact that VLUHR QA is a small agency that performs the majority of its activities in Flanders, VLUHR QA has made a significant effort to be recognised internationally. VLUHR QA has been a full member of ENQA since 2013 and has been registered on the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) also since 2013. VLUHR QA is also a full member of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). VLUHR QA has established a good working relationship with NVAO, Agence pour l'Évaluation de la Qualité de l'Enseignement Supérieur (AEQES) and Music Quality Enhancement (MusiQuE). VLUHR QA Board is composed of independent international experts. In its review activities VLUHR QA involves international experts. However, majority of the experts come from the Netherlands and the reviews take place in Dutch as the majority of study programmes in Flanders are delivered in Dutch. Staff members of VLUHR QA in their personal capacity have participated in ENQA reviews of quality assurance agencies. The SAR and the additional documentation confirms that VLUHR QA staff members regularly attended relevant events organised by ENQA, INQAAHE, European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA).

VLUHR QA'S FUNDING

VLUHR QA is mainly funded by the Flemish higher education institutions which ensures VLUHR QA's accountability to the HE sector and its independence from the government. VLUHR QA has a separate budget line within the VLUHR. VLUHR covers the costs of premises and support services from the general budget of VLUHR but the salaries of VLUHR QA staff members are covered from the income of VLUHR QA. The costs of assessment procedures are fixed in the beginning of the assessment cycle. Currently the price for assessment of a study programme is approximately 33,000 EUR and the price for a reassessment is approximately 18,000 EUR. The price of the assessment procedure covers the staff costs, fees for panel members, travel expenses, expenses for the panel meetings and expenses for publication of the report. In the view of the international broadening of VLUHR QA's scope, VLUHR QA is currently revising the assessment costs.

Between 2015 and 2018 there has been a significant decrease in the VLUHR QA budget as a consequence of the 2015 decree resulting in a negative balance. Currently VLUHR QA operates based on the financial reserve built until 2015. For the period 2019-2022 VLUHR QA has proposed a balanced budget which is sufficient for covering the activities planned until 2022.

FINDINGS: COMPLIANCE OF VLUHR QA WITH THE STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA (ESG)

ESG PART 3: QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

ESG 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.

2014 review recommendation: Position itself at the centre of the debate on future approaches to quality assurance.

The review panel in 2014 states that in its 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 the 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 higher education. 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 that VLUHR QA positions itself in the centre of this debate with Government and higher education stakeholders as it has much valuable experience and insight to offer in the debate.

In 2014 the panel judged this standard (ENQA Criterion 1, ESG 3.3.) as fully compliant.

Evidence

VLUHR QA has been operational since January 2013. It was established as a result of a merger of quality assurance units of VLIR (VLIR QA) and VLHORA (VLHORA QA) and built upon their structure and procedures. The predecessor agencies VLIR and VLHORA were full members of ENQA.

In 2014, when VLUHR QA underwent its previous ENQA review, the discussions about institutional reviews, programme reviews and combination of both were still ongoing. Since the VLUHR QA review in 2014 the Flemish higher education quality assurance system has changed significantly.

If before 2015 VLUHR QA was responsible for all programme assessments in Flanders, in 2015 the VLUHR responsibility was limited. Combination of external institutional and programme assessments was found to be too much of a burden for the higher education institutions. As a result of political discussions and lobby from higher education institutions a mandatory institutional accreditation was introduced which fully replaced the former cyclical programme accreditation by VLUHR QA.

Currently VLUHR QA performs the assessment of new programmes, international joint programmes and programmes that have a reduced period of accreditation as well as the programme assessments of the institutions without institutional review. However, the vision of the VLUHR QA according to the

SAR is to build a quality culture in higher education together with its partners and to be a critical mirror, a source and supporter of innovation and knowledge sharing in the domain of external quality assurance. This is reflected by the strategic plan where one of the goals for the future is to disseminate its expertise with higher education institutions and support institutions in quality assurance activities that are not covered by VLUHR QAs assessment activities.

After the changes in the quality assurance system in 2015 VLUHR QA has re-defined its goals for the future - programme assessments in Flemish higher education (with the last assessments finalised in 2022), assessments of programmes of non-statutory registered institutions, assessments of joint programmes according to the European Approach, assessments of Flemish arts programmes and programme assessments outside Flanders, especially in the Netherlands as well as projects to disseminate expertise between the higher education institutions. The distinction between the evaluation work and other activities is reflected in the Code of Ethics for VLUHR QA staff.

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. VLUHR QA's mission highlights the supportive and enhancing nature of VLUHR QAs activities. The mission and vision are well defined and publicly available on the VLUHR QA website. VLUHR QA is governed by an independent QA Board, which consists of 4 experts in quality assurance chosen and appointed by the VLUHR General Assembly. According to SAR and interviews, the "members of the QA Board all originate from outside the Flemish higher education sector" and do not have a link to Flemish stakeholders. VLUHR QA on its website claims that such composition of the QA Board guarantees independence towards Flemish higher education institutions. The QA Board has a number of responsibilities, including the ratification and establishment of review panels, monitoring the implementation of peer reviews, external representation of VLUHR QA and advising VLUHR. Another governance structure is the Advisory Council which consists of the representative of the universities (proposed by VLIR), representative of the universities of applied sciences and arts (proposed by VLHORA) and a representative of VVS (proposed by VVS). No other stakeholders are represented in the Advisory Council. According to SAR, the Advisory Council discusses all matters concerning the external quality assurance policy and the assessment procedures of VLUHR QA and provides recommendations.

Analysis

From the information provided in SAR and during the discussions, it is clear that VLUHR QA has faced significant changes and has been forced to change internally.

The mission statement of VLUHR QA is clear and fully reflects the supportive nature of VLUHR QA's activities.

During the site visit the panel received sufficient evidence that VLUHR QA is trusted and well appreciated by the higher education institutions. Although VLUHR QA has not participated in developing the quality assurance system that will come into effect from September 2019 higher education institutions value the support provided by VLUHR QA and are willing to cooperate in the future.

The governance of VLUHR QA is performed by the VLUHR QA Board, which is composed of four independent experts with international experience. The VLUHR QA has the greatest responsibility for the policies and procedures of VLUHR QA. Though the panel agrees that international expertise is important, the panel is of the opinion that the Flemish higher education community should be

involved in the ownership of the quality assurance policies and procedures in Flanders. Stakeholders should play a more strategic role in the governance of VLUHR QA. The current composition of the VLUHR QA Board does not ensure full stakeholder participation in the governance of the agency and thus the standard is not fully met. In addition, the VLUHR QA Board currently operates more like a council of experts. An indication of the consultative nature of the VLUHR QA Board is the fact that since 2015 VLUHR QA staff members are always present during the QA Board meetings and take an active part by providing information on certain agenda items at the request of the QA Board. The meeting minutes studied by the panel confirm it. VLUHR QA considers this as a good practice which strengthens the links with QA Board and claims that the QA Board has full final responsibility for their decisions.

The Advisory Council whose function is to advise the VLUHR QA Board consists of representatives of only three organisations – VLIR, VLHORA and VVS. As explained by VLUHR QA staff, the members nominated by VLUHR and VLHORA are first nominated by quality assurance groups and then ratified by the boards of both organisations. A similar appointment procedure – by the general meeting of VVS – applies to the student member. However, the composition of the Advisory Council does not reflect the variety of stakeholders that participate in higher education governance.

Currently the main area of work for VLUHR QA are the programme assessments. After the changes in the quality assurance system in 2015 VLUHR QA had redefined its goals for the future. In addition to different programme assessments these goals include the dissemination of expertise between the higher education institutions – demand-driven quality assurance projects with higher education institutions. VLUHR QA has clearly separated the assessment activities and project activities. During the site visit the higher education institutions that are currently involved in both assessment activities and project activities confirmed that there is a clear distinction and the activities do not overlap. Currently the number of “projects” is small but VLUHR QA has developed an internal Code of Ethics, which will also ensure the integrity of VLUHR QA staff members once the number of “projects” increases. Another VLUHR QA’s goal for the future is the assessment of programmes outside Flanders, especially in the Netherlands. Currently VLUHR QA mostly operates in a community where the label of VLUHR QA is well recognised and all higher education institutions have a history of cooperation with it. Along with expanding the area of operation, it is important to ensure that the higher education institutions that would be interested in VLUHR QA’s services have the access to all the relevant information.

Panel commendations

The close working relationship with HEIs to promote quality improvement within institutions.

Great flexibility demonstrated in light of 2015 legislative changes – VLUHR QA managed to adopt to the new circumstances effectively and preserve the value of its activities for the HEIs.

Panel recommendations

To ensure enhanced stakeholder participation in the governance of the VLUHR QA through greater involvement of representatives from the Flemish higher education sector.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

VLUHR QA could develop an approach/ guidelines for communicating its services towards the higher education institutions, especially outside Flanders.

VLUHR QA could ensure that regardless of changes in its governance/ advisory structures it benefits from the international experience of independent experts.

Panel conclusion: substantially compliant

ESG 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.

Evidence

VLUHR QA was established as an independent entity of the Flemish Higher Education Council (VLUHR) which was formed after the merger of the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR) and the Flemish Council of Universities of Applied Sciences and Arts (VLHORA). The merger took place in December 2010.

The current role of VLUHR QA in relation to external quality assurance is established by the decree of the Flemish government from 2015 which was provided to the panel as an additional documentation. The role of VLUHR QA is further described in the VLUHR Statutes which were also provided to the panel. The status of VLUHR QA as the responsible institution (and structure within VLUHR) for quality assurance activities was confirmed by the VLUHR Board in 2015 and reconfirmed in 2018.

Following the decree change in 2015 the role of VLUHR QA has been significantly reduced. However, VLUHR QA remains the only quality assurance agency for higher education in Flanders and is responsible for selected external programme assessments. The SAR states that VLUHR QA has been assigned to organise programme assessments until 1st September 2019 and last assessments that are organised according to the current decree will be finalised in 2022. After 2022 VLUHR QA will still be responsible for the assessment of programmes of institutions without an institutional review and for programme assessment according to the European Approach.

Analysis

VLUHR QA is recognised by the Flemish higher education society as the organisation responsible for assessment of study programmes. VLUHR QA operates independently but legally it is a structural unit of VLUHR. The formal status of VLUHR QA and its mandate is defined by the decree of the Flemish Government (changed in 2015) and further elaborated in VLUHR Statutes.

VLUHR QA has a well established reputation in Flanders. Although the higher education institutions in Flanders are able to choose any agency registered on EQAR for performing the assessment of their study programmes, until now all higher education institutions have chosen VLUHR QA. This confirms the continuous support for the agency.

The panel concluded that VLUHR QA was fulfilling its obligations within the framework defined by the 2015 decree.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG 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.

2014 review recommendation states that VLUHR QA should consider strengthening the involvement of students and representatives of industry and professional bodies in its governance arrangements as its stakeholder profile outside the higher education sector is limited.

In 2014 the panel judged this standard (ENQA Criterion 5, ESG 3.6.) as substantially compliant.

In its “Approval of the Application by VLUHR QA for Renewal of Inclusion on the Register” EQAR stated that – “When VLUHR QA was provisionally registered it was flagged for attention whether the organisational structure of the VLUHR QA underlines and safeguards its independence. The Register Committee noted that the review panel analysed in detail the organisational structure of VLUHR QA, especially with regard to the division of responsibilities between the VLUHR Board and the separate VLUHR QA Board. It noted that the latter is responsible for actual evaluation activities of the agency. The Register Committee concurred with the panel’s conclusion that the organisational structures of VLUHR and VLUHR QA are effective in ensuring independence. Progress has been made in comparison to the structures of VLIR and VLHORA. While the Register Committee considers that the flag was addressed, it noted that there remains a need to strengthen involvement of stakeholders in VLUHR QA’s work”.

Evidence

The governance structures of VLUHR QA have not changed since the last review of VLUHR QA in 2015. In the previous ENQA review the governance structure of VLUHR QA was analysed in detail as there were concerns about the independence of the agency taking into account the fact that VLUHR was formed by two representative organisations of higher education institutions.

VLUHR QA is a separate structural unit of VLUHR. According to the SAR, the independence of VLUHR QA is guaranteed by the QA Board, which is composed of experts. While the practice of involving experts is commendable the panel has raised concerns about the ownership of the quality assurance system and the involvement of stakeholders. The concerns of the panel have been explained under ESG 3.1. Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance.

The QA Board is approved by the VLUHR Board, which consists of rectors, presidents and the chairs of the associations chosen and appointed by the VLUHR General Assembly. According to the information obtained during the interviews, there have not been any cases where a candidate proposed by VLUHR QA would have been rejected by the VLUHR Board.

Currently the guidelines for programme assessment prescribe that NVAO is asked to give advice on the composition of the assessment panel for all procedures that can be a subject for a formal decision by NVAO. During the site visit the VLUHR QA staff members informed the panel that this practice has been removed and will not exist in the new quality assurance system in force from autumn 2019.

After completion of an assessment procedure by VLUHR QA, higher education institutions can submit an application for accreditation by NVAO. According to the additional information provided by VLUHR QA since introduction of accreditation there have been two cases where the decision by NVAO differed from the expert panel’s opinion. In these cases, a new or additional assessment has been arranged.

Another element that is specific to the Flemish context is the possibility for higher education institutions to nominate panel members for assessment procedures of their study programmes. According to the information provided by VLURH QA and the higher education institutions this gives the higher education institutions the possibility to nominate qualified experts who are recognised as professionals in the respective field.

According to SAR and the information obtained during the site visit all student experts who participate in programme assessments are nominated by the Flemish Students Union.

Analysis

Although VLUHR is the representative organisation of higher education institutions, the organisational structure of VLUHR QA and its relation with the VLUHR has been established in a way that ensures organisational independence. VLUHR QA is governed by a separate VLUHR QA Board and has a separate Advisory council. VLUHR Board only approves the mission of VLUHR QA. Communication between VLUHR QA and VLUHR takes place through the two VLUHR Secretary Generals.

The development of assessment procedures and methods is the full responsibility of the VLUHR QA. Assessment procedures and methods are developed by VLUHR QA staff members, further discussed by the VLUHR QA Board and the Advisory Council. The review experts are approved by the VLUHR QA Board. The panel had concerns about the operational independence of VLUHR QA due to two elements in the expert nomination procedure – the participation of higher education institutions in the selection process of experts and the mandatory advice of NVAO on the composition of expert panels. During the site visit, the panel discussed the process for selecting experts and came to the conclusion that this practice has proven to be successful in the Flemish context. The overall framework for expert selection and appointment developed by VLUHR QA ensures that the composition of expert panels complies with the criteria set for the experts and that the approved experts do not have any conflict of interest. During the site visit, the panel discussed also the practice of asking for opinion from NVAO. The panel found out that it is a formal procedure which functions as a support mechanism rather than control over the composition of the assessment panels. In most of the cases NVAO does not provide any opinion and even if there is opinion from NVAO the VLUHR QA is not obliged to take it into account. In the few cases where NVAO has provided advice it has been in the form of a suggestion and with the purpose to strengthen the composition of expert panels.

During the site visit, the panel learned that the practice of submitting the panel composition for advice to NVAO has been removed for the upcoming assessment procedures.

The student representatives and student experts interviewed by the panel expressed their position that the experts nominated by the Flemish Students Union for the reviews act in their individual capacity as students of the respective area and not as student representatives.

The panel has made a note of the recommendation formulated by the previous review panel in 2014 and studied the decision by EQAR where the Register Committee has noted that there remains a need to strengthen involvement of stakeholders in VLUHR QA's work.

While the standard on independence was previously judged as substantially compliant, the panel notes that the main concerns of the previous panel were about stakeholder involvement. The current panel has addressed the issue of stakeholder involvement under ESG 3.1. "Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance" and is of the opinion that stakeholder involvement does not affect VLUHR QA's compliance with ESG 3.3.

Moreover, the panel would like to point out that the fact that stakeholders are not fully involved in the governance of VLUHR QA makes VLUHR QA too independent from the Flemish higher education community which raises concerns about the ownership of quality assurance system previously explained under ESG 3.1. “Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance”.

Panel commendations

VLUHR QA has been able to (re)position itself and to act independently in a moving context.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

The VLUHR Board could review the membership of the VLUHR QA Board to ensure sufficient representation from stakeholders.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Standard:

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

2014 review recommendation stated that VLUHR QA should consider how the outputs from its review activities can be further focused to support system-wide analysis and institutional quality improvement and enhancement.

In 2014 the review panel in its report noted that it recognises the constraints currently faced by the agency through significant financial pressures and the volume of procedure-driven activity. The panel recommended that, to fully realise its potential, the agency should discuss with its stakeholders the options to increase its resources for this purpose. The additional resources thus gained could then be directed to increase the volume of system-wide analysis and quality enhancement activity which VLUHR QA can undertake.

In 2014 the panel judged this standard (ENQA Criterion 1, ESG 2.8) as partially compliant.

Evidence

Until 2015 the assessments of programmes by VLUHR QA were often organised in clusters and the review reports included chapters of comparative analysis. Since then there have been very few clustered assessments and the comparative reports of these clusters have not led to any wider analysis.

Both in the SAR and during the site visit the VLUHR QA staff has expressed its awareness about the lack of thematic analysis and explained that the main reason is the lack of review reports that would serve as a sufficient base for the analysis. During the site visit the VLUHR QA staff members confirmed that the lack of thematic analysis is not related to the capacity of VLUHR QA and that their intention is to collect a certain number of review reports for performing meaningful analysis.

The SAR refers to system-wide analyses which is discussed during team meetings and published on the VLUHR QA website. The only example of such system-wide analysis that is available on the VLUHR QA's website covers the period from 2015 to 2018 and is prepared in the form of statistics about the reviews and review results. It includes a limited amount of qualitative analysis. The VLUHR QA website lists a number of publications prepared by VLUHR QA staff members. These publications address a number of relevant issues but are not based on the findings of external quality assurance activities.

During the site visit the panel learned that starting from September 2019 the Flemish government will conduct comparative and thematic analysis. In the SAR VLUHR QA has referred to the view of higher education institutions that would like the VLUHR QA to be involved in these analysis.

Analysis

While the review panel acknowledges the VLUHR QA's intention to collect a certain amount of review reports for performing an extensive thematic analysis, the panel is of the opinion that the current activities by VLUHR QA are not sufficient for fully meeting this standard. The panel expresses its concerns especially in the light of the previous ENQA review where VLUHR QA's compliance with this standard was already highlighted.

The panel appreciates the efforts made by VLUHR QA to demonstrate its compliance with this standard and encourages VLUHR QA to continue the work with analysis of the review process and the review outcomes despite the limited number of assessment procedures.

Panel recommendations

VLUHR QA should actively engage in discussions with the higher education stakeholders other than higher education institutions to ensure that VLUHR QA has an active role in conducting the upcoming comparative and thematic analyses.

VLUHR QA should identify the areas for thematic analysis that would be of interest for the higher education stakeholders.

VLUHR QA should use the results of the thematic analysis in order to improve the quality assurance processes on institutional and national level.

Panel conclusion: partially compliant

ESG 3.5 RESOURCES

Standard:

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

2014 review recommendation states that the merger of staff into the new organisation should be completed as soon as possible.

In 2014 the panel judged this standard (ENQA criterion 1, ESG 3.4.) as substantially compliant.

From EQAR "Approval of the Application by VLUHR QA for Renewal of Inclusion on the Register – the Register Committee noted the panel's comments that the level of resources available to VLUHR

“begins to challenge” (ER, p.35) the high quality work of the agency and that the agency has “just sufficient resources to support its current operations in their current (already reduced) format”

In 2015 the EQAR Register Committee judged this standard as partially compliant.

EQAR Register Committee had flagged this issue for particular attention and requested this issue to be addressed in 2019 report.

Evidence

VLUHR QA is mainly funded by the Flemish higher education institutions. VLUHR QA has a separate budget line in the general budget of VLUHR. VLUHR covers the costs of premises and support services from the general budget of VLUHR but the salaries of VLUHR QA staff members are covered from the income of VLUHR QA. The costs of assessment procedures are fixed in the beginning of the assessment cycle. Currently the price for assessment of a study programme is approximately 33,000 EUR and the price for a re-assessment is approximately 18,000 EUR. The price of the assessment procedure covers the staff costs, fees for panel members, travel expenses, expenses for the panel meetings and expenses for publication of the report.

Between 2015 and 2018 there has been a significant decrease in the VLUHR QA budget resulting in a negative balance. Currently VLUHR QA is dependent on the financial reserve built-up in the period before 2015. For the period 2019-2022 VLUHR QA has proposed a balanced budget which it claims to be sufficient for covering the activities planned until 2022.

VLUHR QA currently employs 5 staff members (4,6 full-time equivalent). VLUHR QA website states that VLUHR QA's team consists of 5 multidisciplinary project managers with international experience in education policy and in both internal and external quality assurance processes.

Analysis

VLUHR QA currently operates according to a balanced budget with is based on the financial reserve built up in the previous years. Although the financial resources are claimed to be sufficient and the panel did not have any evidence of the lack of finances, the panel would like to raise attention to the sustainability of the available funding after 2022. As the staff costs are fully covered from the income of VLUHR QA, further decrease of income could affect the VLUHR QA's ability to maintain the current staff base.

In following-up on the recommendations from the previous ENQA panel VLUHR QA claims that the current number of staff members is sufficient for implementing its current obligations. During the site visit the VLUHR QA members confirmed that the number of staff members is sufficient for performing the mandatory activities and pointed out that in case of additional staff members VLUHR QA could focus on the long-term issues, for example, branding the European approach and focusing on the assessment procedures abroad. As indicated in the SAR and the Strategic Plan, VLUHR QA expects that, even after 2022, there will be sufficient activities and the resulting incomes to maintain the current staff base. The incomes will derive from assessments of institutions without and institutional review and from programme assessments according to the European Approach.

During the site visit the panel did not have any concerns about the efficiency of VLUHR QA staff. The panel appreciated the well-established and documented internal processes, the commitment and professionalism of the staff members and the reputation that the staff members and VLUHR QA in general have within the higher education institutions.

Panel commendations

The dedication and professionalism of the existing members of staff.

Panel recommendations

VLUHR QA should consider looking for additional funding opportunities in the form of international projects or assessment procedures abroad and employ/ appoint a staff member whose main responsibility would be the branding of VLUHR QA in the international environment.

Panel conclusion: substantially compliant

ESG 3.6 INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

Standard:

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

Evidence

VLUHR QA functions according to a clear organisational structure with defined powers and responsibilities.

VLUHR QA internal mechanisms for ensuring quality include the manuals for assessment procedures, the appeals procedure, the complaints procedure and the charter of conduct for panel members. VLUHR QA has also developed the Code of ethics for project managers/secretaries and Code of ethics concerning the projects. Both documents were included in the SAR.

The quality manuals describe the requirements set for the expert panels, including the criteria and charter of conduct for panel members, the procedure for carrying out an assessment and the appeals and complaints procedure.

For monitoring and adjusting the quality of its work VLUHR QA has developed an Internal Quality Assurance policy which has been ratified by the QA Board and discussed with the VLUHR QA Advisory Council. The policy is available on VLUHR QA website. During the site visit the review panel had access also to the VLUHR QA Quality manual which provides a detailed description of VLUHR QA activities and the roles of everyone involved. The Quality Manual describes the objectives, procedures and systematics of the VLUHR QA activities.

VLUHR QA has introduced several mechanisms for measuring stakeholder satisfaction – the SAR refers to online surveys for panel members and representatives of the reviewed institutions, focus group discussions for panel members and representatives of the reviewed institutions, stakeholder consultations and intervision (sharing experience and applying the four-eyes principle) between staff members.

According to the Complaints procedure the purpose of the procedure is to deal with complaints in a fair and independent manner, without discriminatory consequences for the submitter. VLUHR QA does not refer to intolerance or discrimination in any other internal documents.

During the site visit the panel had access to a number of meeting minutes of VLUHR QA team, VLUHR QA Board and VLUHR QA Advisory Council.

Analysis

Despite the small size of the VLUHR QA team, the internal quality assurance processes are formalised, well documented and described in detail. During the site visit the review panel recognised that the internal processes are well understood and implemented by VLUHR QA staff members and the relevant processes are also well communicated to external stakeholders, particularly to the higher education institutions.

The higher education institutions understand, value and respect the working principles of VLUHR QA.

In the panel's view the feedback mechanisms implemented by VLUHR QA allow the VLUHR QA to obtain an objective feedback that can be used for improving the assessment procedures and the general activities of VLUHR QA team.

Panel commendations

VLUHR QA has a well-designed internal quality assurance system which is not only described but also well-functioning.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG 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.

Evidence

VLUHR QA regularly undergoes reviews for ENQA membership and registration on EQAR. This is VLUHR QA's first review against the ESG 2015. The previous ENQA review of VLUHR QA took place in 2014 and was conducted according to ESG 2005. Before the establishment of VLUHR its predecessors – VLIR and VLHORA – were members of ENQA.

Analysis

Based on all the evidence collected the panel is confident that VLUHR QA is committed to demonstrate its compliance with the ESG, through cyclical review, in order to renew the ENQA membership.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG PART 2: EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

ESG 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.

Evidence

The VLUHR QA assessment framework provides a comprehensive approach for evaluating internal quality assurance processes. There are two sets of criteria – for evaluating study programmes in Flanders and for evaluating joint programmes according to the European approach. Both sets of criteria are included in 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. The SAR includes a table which demonstrates that the ESG Part 1 expectations are addressed by VLUHR QA in the following way:

	Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education	Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes
1.1. Policy for quality assurance	S2, S4	S9, S1
1.2. Design and approval of programmes	S1, S2	S21, S23, 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	S9
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

Whereas the Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes refers to certain ESG standards in the assessment standards by VLUHR QA, the standards defined in the Manual for External Quality Assurance in Flemish higher education are general and do not refer to any specific ESG standards.

Programme assessments in Flemish higher education

With the introduction of institutional accreditation by NVAO the higher education institutions have been in charge of establishing an internal quality assurance in compliance with the ESG Part 1. While NVAO is able to address the whole internal quality assurance system of a higher education institution through the institutional reviews, VLUHR QA ability to get an overview is limited. In the SAR VLUHR

QA states that the programme assessment focuses on the quality of educational processes rather than the quality assurance procedures themselves.

There are overall three standards for evaluation of study programmes in Flemish higher education – 1) targeted outcome level (quality of objectives), 2) educational learning environment (quality of educational processes) and 3) outcome level achieved (quality of achieved outcomes). For the institutions which are not subject to institutional review there is additional standard – 4) structure and organisation of internal quality assurance.

Assessments of joint programmes according to the European approach

Assessments are performed according to the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes approved by the European Higher Education Area ministers in 2015. In the European Approach the standards are designed along the ESG Part 1 and both the title of the standard and the sub-standards (1.1, 1.2...) reflect the spirit of a certain standard in ESG Part 1.

Analysis

The Manual for External Quality Assurance in Flemish higher education does not make direct reference to the specific ESG standards but does list the issues described by the ESG under the assessment standards. The standards included in the Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes are structured based on the ESG and explicitly refer to certain standards.

The panel would like to comment on the alignment with the ESG Part 1 for both sets of criteria in general and also on certain ESG Part 1 standards.

Programme assessments in Flemish higher education

There are only four assessment standards from which only three standards are mandatory. All four standards are described in a very detailed way.

ESG 1.1 is addressed only for higher education institutions which are not subject to an institutional review. According to the manual, the programme has to explain the actions taken to improve the quality at programme level. VLUHR QA states that the programme level quality assurance procedures focus on the quality of the study process but the internal quality assurance system has to be assessed within an institutional review. The institutional reviews are performed by NVAO which functions within the same higher education system but is a separate quality assurance agency and there is no cooperation between VLUHR QA and NVAO on this matter. The Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education has been endorsed by NVAO and recognised as in line with their accreditation framework. The review panel recognised the context in which VLUHR QA operates but considers that VLUHR QA should find a way to address the elements mentioned by ESG 1.1. The ESG 1.1 could be addressed at least in the background information which does not have a direct impact on the assessment for a certain standard. This background information could be provided by the higher education institution and taken into account by the expert panel for understanding the profile of the higher education institution.

The panel also is of the opinion that the ESG 1.2 currently is addressed by assessing the learning outcomes of the programme (extent of harmonisation with the Flemish Qualification Framework, domain specific learning outcomes, requirements of the discipline and professional context, also international, etc.) but not the procedure for design and internal approval of programmes.

The SAR states that the domain-specific learning outcomes are designed on a higher level with participation of all higher education institutions, who implement certain type of study programmes,

and the relevant stakeholders. However, in panel's opinion the information provided by the higher education institution and the assessment standards should also cover the approach and process for developing study programme within the higher education institution.

In panel's opinion also the ESG 1.4 could be covered in a more complete way. Based on the description of the standards provided in the manual, the elements of recognition within study programme are not addressed. Also, the correlation between admission, progression and certification could be covered in a more detailed way, not only by describing and assessing the guidance provided to the students.

In relation to the ESG 1.8 and taking into account the fact that the programmes which are assessed are already operating, the assessment standards should include more reference to the clarity and accessibility of the public information provided by the higher education institution.

When describing the alignment with ESG 1.10 VLUHR QA explains that since 1991 all external programme assessments have been cyclical and accreditation is awarded for a period of 8 years. Currently the cyclical approach of VLUHR QA is threatened as the programme assessments which VLUHR QA is mandated to perform by the decree will come to an end by 2022. The cyclical approach will remain for institutions without an institutional review.

Assessments of joint programmes according to the European approach

The number of standards used for assessment of joint study programmes is bigger than for the assessments in Flemish higher education. It is visible that the standards fully correspond with the ESG part 1 and the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, approved by the European Higher Education Area ministers in 2015. However, the standards are general and do not provide much guidance for application.

Although the standards are fully aligned with the European approach, the panel would like to comment on certain ESG Part 1 standards.

The assessment standards used by VLUHR QA and the guidelines provided to the review panels should address the process/approach to programme design with emphasis on the involvement of all the relevant stakeholders which is an essential element of ESG 1.2.

The assessment standards could also reflect the spirit of ESG 1.7 – the collection and analysis of the data relevant for programme management, for example, key performance indicators, profile of the student population, student progression, success and drop out rates, students's satisfaction, learning resources and support (analysis), career paths etc.

[Panel recommendations]

For the assessment procedures in Flemish higher education VLUHR QA should make sure that all the elements covered by the ESG Part 1 are analysed in the review reports. This could be done either by further detalisation of the standards or by ensuring guidance to the review panels.

Panel conclusion: substantially compliant

ESG 2.2 DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE

Standard:

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

Stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement.

Evidence

Currently VLUHR QA performs four quality assurance procedures:

- Assessments of new study programmes;
- Assessments of programmes with a reduced period of accreditation;
- Programme assessments of institutions without an institutional review (non-statutory/registered institutions);
- Assessments of international joint study programmes.

The procedures are performed according to two manuals. Assessments of new study programmes and programmes with a reduced period of accreditation as well as programme assessments of registered institutions are performed according to the Manual for External Quality Assurance in Flemish higher education. Assessments of joint study programmes are performed according to the Manual for European approach for Quality Assurance of joint programmes. However, it has been decided to develop a separate manual for programme assessments of non-statutory (registered) institutions. VLUHR QA is planning to offer assessments of Flemish art programmes and bachelor/master programmes outside Flanders and new manuals will be developed for these procedures in the near future.

The Manual for External Quality Assurance in Flemish higher education was developed in consultation with the higher education institutions and it has been in use since 2013 with the updated version published in 2015. The manual was also endorsed by NVAO certifying that it is in line with the NVAO accreditation framework. The assessment methodology, used for the assessments in Flemish higher education, has undergone several changes that are related both to the changes in the decree in 2015 and feedback received from the higher education institutions and expert panels.

The manual identifies the following objectives of the external quality assurance system: improvement and assurance function, accountability function, regulation of the higher education system. The VLUHR QA Board is responsible for monitoring the programme assessments and their conformity with the manuals.

The Manual for European approach for Quality Assurance of joint programmes was developed in spring 2018. It was discussed in VLUHR QA Advisory Council and submitted for advice to NVAO. The Manual for European approach for Quality Assurance of joint programmes is currently being used for the first time with the first site visit taking place in March 2019.

Analysis

All assessment procedures performed by VLUHR QA are organised according to two manuals. While the Manual for External Quality Assurance in Flemish higher education has been in use since 2013, the Manual for European approach for Quality Assurance of joint programmes was established only

recently. Both manuals serve as the guidelines for higher education institutions and for experts during the review process as well as describe the overall assessment procedure.

The representatives of the higher education institutions interviewed during the site visit found the manuals well-structured and clearly written. They also appreciated the support provided by VLUHR QA staff in preparation for an assessment procedure.

The workload caused by assessment procedures was evaluated as optimal by the higher education institutions. As the timeline for a certain assessment procedure is set well in advance and the activities within the timeline take place according to a common framework, the workload is well distributed over the time and does not cause additional burden.

The assessment standards for assessments in Flemish higher education (standard 2 and, for non-statutory registered institutions also standard 4) allow the higher education institutions to demonstrate improvement.

The criteria for outcomes are well explained in both manuals. In case of assessment in Flemish higher education the criteria have been aligned with NVAO which is the decision-making body for programme accreditation. In case of assessment of joint programmes the criteria are already set in the European approach and have to be applied also by the decision-making body.

Panel commendations

The clarity and usefulness of the VLUHR manuals.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG 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

2014 review recommendation states that the responsible Flemish bodies should 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.

In 2014 the panel judged this standard (ENQA Criterion 1, ESG 2.6.) as substantially compliant.

The EQAR Register Committee flagged this issue for particular attention and indicated that this issue needs to be addressed in 2019 report.

Evidence

The process for all external reviews performed by VLUHR QA follows a structure which includes a self-assessment, an external assessment including a site visit, a report and follow-up.

The process of the reviews is described in the Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education and in the Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. Both manuals are well structured, clearly written, applied consistently for the respective reviews and available publicly on the VLUHR QA's homepage.

For the consistency of reviews and for supporting the panel a VLUHR QA staff member is appointed as a review coordinator for each review.

Before the site visit the panel members participate in the preparatory meeting. In case of reviews in Flemish higher education the preparatory meeting covers the higher education system in Flanders, quality assurance in Flemish higher education, visit schedule and practical arrangements. For reviews according to the European approach the content of preparatory meeting is described in a more general way. During the preparatory meeting also preparation for the site visit takes place. The experts panel discusses the first impressions of the SAR, the evaluation assignments and the training for the site visit as well as communication training takes place.

The site visit for assessment of one programme normally lasts for 1 day, preceded by a preparatory internal consultation process within the panel. The review reports are prepared by the VLUHR QA staff member in consultation with the panel members. The draft reports undergo feedback rounds and are published on the VLUHR QA website.

According to the Code of ethics for project managers/secretaries the review reports are drafted by VLUHR QA staff members based on – the self-assessment report prepared by the study program with the accompanying appendices, any additional information supplied at the request of the committee, the conversations conducted within the framework of the visitation visit, the observations made by committee members during site visits, the completed assessment forms from the committee members.

For reviews of Flemish study programmes the follow-up arrangements were not a specified part of the review process until 2018 and were not supported by the higher education institutions. However, in November 2018 it was decided by the QA Board that a follow-up procedure would become part of any assessment in the future, although it would not be mandatory. The higher education institutions would have the possibility to decline a follow-up procedure as the VLUHR QA does not have a legal power to force it. The panel learnt that until now, no follow-up procedures had been performed.

For reviews of joint programmes according to the European approach, the accreditation agency that takes decision has to agree with the cooperating institutions about a follow-up procedure. Such procedure is sufficient for VLUHR QA provided it complies with the VLUHR QA procedure. If the accreditation agency does not require a follow-up, the VLUHR QA follow-up procedure is applicable. Similarly to the reviews of Flemish study programmes, until now no follow-up procedures have been performed.

Analysis

All review procedures by VLUHR QA follow a standard framework which includes the self-evaluation report, site visit by the experts group, experts report and a follow-up.

The panel learned that the reviews of Flemish higher education are primarily performed in Dutch. English language is used only when requested by the higher education institution or when assessing an international joint study programme.

The panel noticed that the review coordinator, appointed by VLUHR QA, has a significant role in the preparation of review report and questioned if this might have an impact on the ownership of the panel for the review report.

Previously there have been remarks regarding the follow-up procedure. For the reviews in Flemish higher education since November 2018 follow-up is a formal though not mandatory part of the review process. The institutions that are currently undergoing an assessment procedure are motivated by the fact that the price for the follow-up is included in the price of the review and the price of the review has not been modified. The VLUHR QA staff members confirmed that for the upcoming reviews the pricelist will be updated and will include the actual costs of a follow-up. For the reviews according to the European approach a mandatory follow-up has been included in the review process since the design of the methodology.

The review panel appreciates the progress made with the establishment of a follow-up procedure for the reviews in Flemish higher education. However, taking into account the mandatory (not voluntary) nature of the VLUHR QA review activities in the Flemish higher education the panel considers that the follow-up should also be mandatory part of the review process.

There have not been any actual follow-up procedures neither for the reviews in Flemish higher education nor for the reviews according to the European approach. Due to the lack of such evidence the panel can not assess the impact and effectiveness of these procedures. Considering the supportive nature of the VLUHR QA's assessment procedures the panel is of the opinion that the experience with a mandatory follow-up would encourage the higher education institutions to approach VLUHR QA with development projects.

Panel recommendations

The VLUHR Board should make the follow-up procedure a mandatory element of the review process, while also collaborating with the HEIs and other stakeholders to ensure the procedure provide a clear added value for them.

Panel conclusion: substantially compliant

ESG 2.4 PEER-REVIEW EXPERTS

Standard:

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

2014 review recommendation was that VLUHR QA should keep 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”

In 2014 the panel judged this standard (ENQA Criterion 1, ESG 2.4) as fully compliant.

Evidence

The procedure for composing assessment panel is identical for assessments performed according to the Manual for External Quality Assurance in Flemish higher education and the Manual for European

approach for Quality Assurance of joint programmes. The criteria set for panel members and the general criteria for the composition of panel are described in manuals.

Each panel is composed by four members, including a student member. The student members for review procedures in the Flemish higher education are nominated by the Flemish Students Union.

VLUHR QA emphasises that a panel must be authoritative, independent and expert. Each panel member has to declare his independence by signing an independence statement as well as the ethical code of conduct.

A distinctive feature of the Flemish quality assurance system is the process for establishing a panel. This approach applies to all panel members except the student member. First of all, the higher education institutions can propose panel members. Once the chair of the panel is approved by the VLUHR QA Board, the chair and VLUHR QA can make a proposal about other members of the panel based on the proposal of the higher education institution. The chair can also propose other members. Finally, the full composition of the panel is approved by VLUHR QA Board.

Since the introduction of accreditation the composition of review panels has been sent to NVAO for advice. Panels concerns related to this issue are explained under ESG 3.3. Independence. However, the panel learned that starting from autumn 2019 this practice will no longer exist.

VLUHR QA has addressed the recommendation of the previous ENQA panel by strengthening the training and briefing of panel members which now focuses more on the structure and organisation of higher education and includes a session on quality assurance.

Analysis

All quality assurance procedures by VLUHR QA are performed by a group of experts that includes a student member.

VLUHR QA ensures that panel members together cover the expertise required for an experts group – subject level expertise, pedagogical/educational expertise, audit and quality assurance expertise, international expertise and professional experience.

The selection of experts takes place in several stages. The higher education institutions interviewed were satisfied with the quality of review panels and especially appreciated the possibility to suggest experts.

VLUHR QA is responsible for organising the training of each experts group. Following the recommendation of the previous ENQA panel, the content of the training has been amended in order to better integrate the experts that do not work in the higher education sector. Currently the training includes sessions on the higher education system and quality assurance system.

All experts that participate in assessment procedures have to confirm that they do not have a conflict of interest with the institution under assessment. The possible conflict of interest is verified throughout the selection stages.

As most of the reviews take place in Dutch, VLUHR QA is not able to attract experts without sufficient proficiency in Dutch. However, in order to have international expertise, VLUHR QA approaches the experts from the Netherlands as well as other experts who are proficient in Dutch but do not reside in Flanders.

Panel commendations

The involvement of higher education institutions in the identification of potential members of review panels.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG 2.5 CRITERIA FOR OUTCOMES

Standard:

Any outcomes or judgements 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.

Evidence

The criteria for outcomes of VLUHR QA assessment procedures are outlined in both manuals.

In case of assessing Flemish higher education programmes each programme is assessed according to three or four standards set out in the assessment framework. Each standard must be evaluated according to a two-point scale – “satisfactory” or “unsatisfactory”. The panel also has to express the opinion on the quality of the programme as a whole – also on a two-point scale – “satisfactory” or “unsatisfactory”. The final opinion on the programme can also be “satisfactory for a limited period” if on the first assessment one or two standards are assessed as “unsatisfactory”. The definitions of “satisfactory” and “unsatisfactory” as well as the rules for the final opinion are part of the manual.

In case of assessing a joint study programme according to the European approach, each of the nine standards must be evaluated according to a three-point scale – “compliant”, “partially compliant” or “non-compliant”. The definitions of compliance are outlined in the manual.

When making a judgement of a standard the panel must provide facts and analyses that support the judgement.

The consistency of outcomes is ensured by standardised assessment forms and by a VLUHR QA staff member who acts as the project manager/ secretary of the review. They draft the review report based on the input from panel members. Another staff member of VLUHR QA is responsible for reviewing the report. The published reports are forwarded to the VLUHR QA Board.

Analysis

The final outcome of VLUHR QA assessment procedures is the experts report which includes the experts’ judgement on assessment standards and, in the case of assessment in the Flemish higher education, also the final judgement on the study programme as a whole.

The panel finds that the assessment standards are clear and detailed. The lack of appeals and complaints cases (please see under ESG 2.7. Complaints and appeals) indicates that the higher education institutions have not raised any concerns about the consistency of assessment outcomes. The panel also appreciates the transition from a four-point assessment scale to a two-point assessment scale for the assessments in Flanders which is found to be clearer by the higher education institutions.

However, the panel would like to comment on the fact that the review reports include a foreword signed by the chair of the VLUHR QA Board. In practice the reports are read by the VLUHR QA Board only after publication meaning that the foreword of the chair is included without a previous review/ approval by the chair. Although the forewords are rather general, the panel finds this practice unusual.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

VLUHR QA could revise the process for internal approval of panel reports to ensure that the review reports are read by the VLUHR QA Board before publishing or replace the foreword of the VLUHR QA Board by a more general introduction by VLUHR QA.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG 2.6 REPORTING

Standard:

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

Evidence

Full reports of all assessment procedures performed by VLUHR QA are published on the VLUHR QA website. The reports are structured according to a unified framework. They undergo an internal editing process that starts with feedback from the assessed institution, response by the review panel and feedback to the assessed institution. The final reports are read by the VLUHR QA Board after publication.

The reports available on VLUHR QA website clearly show that VLUHR QA has invested in the accessibility of the reports. The reports have been laid out as brochures and are visually attractive. All reports include an executive summary.

It must be noted that currently there are no reports available for the procedures performed according to the European approach as the site visit for the first procedure of this type took place in early 2019.

Analysis

Before and after the site visit the review panel analysed a small sample of assessment reports published by VLUHR QA. The panel noted that the review reports follow a unified structure, they are well organised and visually attractive for a reader.

During the discussions with stakeholders, the panel was convinced that, despite the small number of study programmes that are subject to programme assessments, the assessment reports published by VLUHR QA are found to be useful by those who have interest in these study programmes.

The panel was given an example of students who would like to study in non-statutory registered institutions and therefore cannot benefit from state financed education. These students would use the VLUHR QA assessment reports in order to make an informed study choice.

The higher education institutions claimed that the review reports are written in academic language that is not always clear for a reader outside the higher education community. However, this issue is not unique to the quality assurance system in Flanders.

The review panel came to a conclusion that the efforts made by VLUHR QA in informing the wider public about the review results are commendable and the requirements of the standard are fully met.

Panel commendations

VLUHR QA's arrangements for disseminating the outcomes of its reviews.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG 2.7 COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

Standard:

Complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to the institutions.

Evidence

VLUHR QA has an established procedure for complaints and appeals that is applicable both to assessment procedures performed according to the Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education and the Manual for the European Approach. The appeals and complaints procedures are published on the VLUHR QA website.

The appeals and complaints procedure was drafted by VLUHR QA team, discussed with the Advisory Council and later approved by the VLUHR QA Board.

In case a standard is evaluated as unsatisfactory, the higher education institution can submit a formal appeal to the Appeals Committee. In case the higher education institution has any complaints regarding the assessment process, it can submit a formal complaint to the VLUHR QA Board.

The panel was informed by VLUHR QA that no appeals or complaints have been received since the decree change in 2015. The VLUHR QA explains this as a consequence of the disappearance of cluster assessments as well as with the changes in the assessment scale from the four-point scale (unsatisfactory – satisfactory – good – excellent) to two-point scale (unsatisfactory – satisfactory).

Analysis

The panel found that the descriptions of the appeals and complaints procedures by VLUHR QA are detailed and complete. The Appeals Committee is organisationally and operationally independent from the VLUHR QA. The panel was not able to assess the practical implementation of the appeals process as there have not been any cases of appeals or complaints since 2015. The lack of appeals cases can also be explained by the fact that VLUHR QA does not take formal decisions on accreditation.

During the discussion with VLUHR QA staff members the panel was convinced that VLUHR QA has managed to find other ways for solving conflicts than a formal appeal. For example, the representatives of higher education institutions appreciate the final discussion where the experts panel discusses the main findings with the management of the programme before announcing the result. Another element of the assessment process noted by the higher education institutions is the shift to a three-point scale for judgment on the assessment of a standard.

The panel understood that the VLUHR QA team is readily approachable for the higher education institutions. The issues that could become a subject for appeals or complaints can normally be solved by frequent communication.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS

Uncertainty remains about the sustainability of VLUHR QA beyond the work programme that will be completed by 2022. Although VLUHR QA has revised its strategic goals and included additional areas of work, still much effort needs to be put to ensure successful operation of VLUHR QA when the tasks mandated by the decree will come to an end. Currently VLUHR QA provides services to higher education institutions in Flanders therefore its affiliation with VLUHR and funding flow coming from VLUHR is justified. Once the mandated activities come to an end and VLUHR QA starts to operate in a more international environment the question about financing and the ownership of VLUHR QA might appear.

CONCLUSION

SUMMARY OF COMMENDATIONS

ESG 3.1

The close working relationship with HEIs to promote quality improvement within institutions.

Great flexibility demonstrated in light of 2015 legislative changes – VLUHR QA managed to adopt to the new circumstances effectively and preserve the value of its activities for the HEIs.

ESG 3.3

VLUHR QA has been able to (re)position itself and to act independently in a moving context.

ESG 3.5

The dedication and professionalism of the existing members of staff.

ESG 3.6

VLUHR QA has a well-designed internal quality assurance system which is not only described but also well-functioning.

ESG 2.2.

The clarity and usefulness of VLUHR QA's manuals.

ESG 2.4

The involvement of higher education institutions in the identification of potential members of review panels.

ESG 2.6

VLUHR QA's arrangements for disseminating the outcomes of its reviews.

OVERVIEW OF JUDGEMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The panel found VLUHR QA in full compliance with the ESG in 9 out of 14 standards. In 4 out of 14 standards the panel found VLUHR QA to be substantially compliant with the ESG, while 1 standard was assessed as only partially compliant. The summary of the compliance assessment is as follows:

- Fully compliant with the following ESG – 3.2, 3.3, 3.6, 3.7, 2.2, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6, 2.7
- Substantially compliant with the following ESG – 3.1, 3.5, 2.1, 2.3,
- Partially compliant with the following ESG – 3.4.

ESG 3.1 – substantially compliant

To ensure enhanced stakeholder participation in the governance of the VLUHR QA through greater involvement of representatives from the Flemish higher education sector.

ESG 3.2 – fully compliant

ESG 3.3 – fully compliant

ESG 3.4 – partially compliant

The panel recommends that:

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

ESG 3.5 – substantially compliant

VLUHR QA should consider looking for additional funding opportunities in the form of international projects or assessment procedures abroad and employ/ appoint a staff member whose main responsibility would be the branding of VLUHR QA in the international environment.

ESG 3.6 – fully compliant

ESG 3.7 – fully compliant

ESG 2.1 – substantially compliant

For the assessment procedures in Flemish higher education VLUHR QA should make sure that all the elements covered by the ESG Part 1 are analysed in the review reports. This could be done either by further detalisation of the standards or by ensuring guidance to the review panels.

ESG 2.2 – fully compliant

ESG 2.3 – substantially compliant

The VLUHR Board should consider making the follow-up procedure a mandatory element of the review process , while also collaborating with the HEIs and other stakeholders to ensure the procedure provide a clear added value for them.

ESG 2.4 – fully compliant

ESG 2.5 – fully compliant

ESG 2.6 – fully compliant

ESG 2.7 – fully compliant

In light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the review panel is satisfied that, in the performance of its functions, VLUHR QA is in compliance with the ESG.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

ESG 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for further development

VLUHR QA could develop an approach/ guidelines for communicating its services towards the higher education institutions, especially outside Flanders.

VLUHR QA could ensure that regardless of changes in its governance/ advisory structures it benefits from the international experience of independent experts.

ESG 3.3 Independence

The VLUHR Board could review the membership of the VLUHR QA Board to ensure sufficient representation from stakeholders.

ESG 2.5 Criteria for outcomes

VLUHR QA could revise the process for internal approval of panel reports to ensure that the review reports are read by the VLUHR QA Board before publishing or replace the foreword of the VLUHR QA Board by a more general introduction by VLUHR QA.

ANNEXES

ANNEX 1: PROGRAMME OF THE SITE VISIT

Day 1, 10 June 2019		
TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
12:30 – 14:00	Panel lunch	
14:00 – 15:30	Arrival to the agency and review panel private meeting	
15:30 – 16:30	Interview with self-assessment group / QA staff	Dieter Cortvriendt , policy advisor Klara De Wilde , coordinator Andreas Smets , policy advisor Patrick Van den Bosch , policy advisor
16:30	Wrap-up meeting among panel members and preparation for day II	
Day 2, 11 June 2019		
9.00 – 9:30	Review panel private meeting	
9:30 – 10:30	Interview with the QA Board	Petter Aaslestad (chair), professor of Scandinavian Literature, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU, Trondheim), former chair of the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT), former chair of Forskerforbundet (Norwegian Association of Researchers) Henning Dettleff , Bereichsleiter Fortbildung, Bundesverband für Wohnen und Stadtentwicklung, Berlin Nik Heerens , International Programmes Manager, Signal, UK; former Head of Sparqs ('student participation in quality Scotland'); until last year Director of the European Students' Union Elfriede Heinen (vice-chair), former educational advisor, Fédération de l'enseignement supérieur catholique (FédESuC/SeGEC – Bruxelles)
10:30 – 10:45	Review panel private meeting	
10:45 – 11:30	Interview with the VLUHR Board	Willy Claes , chair of the VLUHR Board Koen Verlaeckt , secretary-general of VLIR Eric Vermeylen , secretary-general of VLHORA
11:30 – 13:00	Review panel private meeting + lunch	
13:00 – 14:00	Interview with the stakeholders: Advisory Council and VVS	Advisory Council Ruben Janssens , representative of VVS (Flemish Students Union)

		Piet Verhesschen , director of the Educational Policy Unit, KU Leuven, representing VLIR VVS Dylan Coeck , board member of VVS (Flemish Students Union)
14:00 – 14:30	Interview with stakeholders: Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO)	Axel Aerden , Director Flanders NVAO Marc Luwel , Board member NVAO
14:30 – 14:45	Review panel private meeting	
14:45 – 15:45	Interview with representatives of assessed programmes	Joke Claeys , QA coordinator, Universiteit Gent Benoit de Baere , Academic Director Flanders Business School (registered HE institution) Daniel De Schreye , Head of the programme Digital Humanities, KU Leuven Evelyne Lagrou , Head of the programme Toegepaste Gezondheidswetenschappen, Hogeschool West-Vlaanderen Franziska Kupfer , Head of the programme Maritime and Air Transport Management, Universiteit Antwerpen Vera Pletincx , QA coordinator, Arteveldehogeschool; member of the Advisory Council (since March 2019) Sanne Tanghe , QA coordinator, HogeschoolWest-Vlaanderen Hellen Van Berlo , QA coordinator, LUCA School of Arts (involved in an assessment following the European Approach)
15:45 – 16:00	Review panel private meeting	
16:00 – 16:45	Interview with members of review panels, including students and international members	Kristien Arnouts , educational expert, chair of the reassessment panel Secundair onderwijs, Karel de Grote Hogeschool Julien de Smet , student, member of the assessment panel DocNomads, LUCA School of Arts (following the European Approach) and the reassessment panel Audiovisuele Kunsten, Erasmushogeschool Brussel Paul Janssen , professional field – and domain expert, chair of the reassessment panel Nutrition and rural development, Universiteit Gent Bart Jourquin , domain- and educational expert, chair of the reassessment panel of Maritime and Air Transport Management, Universiteit Antwerpen Stephane Plaisance , professional field expert, member of the assessment panel Bio informatica, Hogeschool West-Vlaanderen Bart Vanbrabant , domain- and educational expert, member of the assessment panel Energiemanagement, Hogeschool West-Vlaanderen Sofie Van Hecke , professional field expert, member of the assesement panel Toegepaste gezondheidswetenschappen, Hogeschool West-Vlaanderen
16:45 – 17:00	Interview with members of review panels, including students and international members via skype	Rudy Martens , domain- and educational expert, chair of the reassessment panel Vesalius College (registered HE institution)
17:00 – 17:30	Review panel private meeting	

17:30 – 18:30	Meeting with the VLUHR QA staff	Dieter Cortvriendt , policy advisor Klara De Wilde , coordinator Andreas Smets , policy advisor Patrick Van den Bosch , policy advisor
18:30	Wrap-up meeting among panel members and preparation for day III	
Day 3, 12 June 2019		
9.00 – 10:30	Meeting among panel members to agree on final lines of enquiry	
10:30 – 11:00	Meeting with VLUHR QA to clarify any pending issues	Dieter Cortvriendt , policy advisor Klara De Wilde , coordinator Andreas Smets , policy advisor Patrick Van den Bosch , policy advisor
11:00 – 11:30	Review panel private meeting to agree on findings	
11:30 – 12:00	Final debriefing meeting with VLUHR QA to give preliminary findings	Dieter Cortvriendt , policy advisor Klara De Wilde , coordinator Andreas Smets , policy advisor Patrick Van den Bosch , policy advisor
12:00 – 13:00	Review panel lunch	

ANNEX 2: TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE REVIEW

External review of the Flemish Higher Education Council - Quality Assurance (VLUHR QA) by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)

Annex I: TERMS OF REFERENCE

August 2018

1. Background and Context

VLUHR QA is an independent non-profit agency for external quality assurance that contributes to the safeguarding and improvement of the quality in higher education. VLUHR QA is a partner in stimulating, developing and implementing a quality culture in higher education. As a centre of expertise, it aims to offer and share its knowledge with stakeholders and interesting parties. VLUHR QA stands for commitment, expertise, independency, equity, transparency and improvement-oriented approach.

Over the past years, VLUHR QA has built up an extensive expertise in assessing the professional and academic study programmes in Flanders. In 2015 a new decree regarding quality assurance in HE was approved. This decree stipulates that each HE institution must undergo an institutional review (coordinated by the NVAO). Furthermore the HE institutions must install a quality assurance system to safeguard the quality of their study programmes. Each HE institution has developed its own QA system. As a consequence, the existing study programmes do no longer need to be assessed by VLUHR QA.

Since 2015 VLUHR QA coordinates the assessments of new study programmes, joint programmes and programmes in an improvement process of universities and university colleges. VLUHR QA also coordinates the programme assessments of registered institutions.

VLUHR QA has been an ENQA member since 2013 and is applying for renewal of its membership.

VLUHR QA has been registered on EQAR since 2013 and is applying for renewal of registration.

2. Purpose and Scope of the Evaluation

This review, will evaluate the way in which and to what extent VLUHR QA fulfils the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*. Consequently, the review will provide information to the ENQA Board to aid its consideration of whether membership of VLUHR QA should be reconfirmed and to EQAR to support VLUHR QA application to the register.

The review panel is not expected, however, to make any judgements as regards granting membership.

2.1 Activities of VLUHR QA within the scope of the ESG

In order for VLUHR QA to apply for ENQA membership and for registration in EQAR, this review will analyse all VLUHR QA activities that are within the scope of the ESG, i.e. reviews, audits, evaluations

or accreditation of higher education institutions or programmes that relate to teaching and learning (and their relevant links to research and innovation). This is regardless of whether these activities are carried out within or outside the EHEA, and whether they are obligatory or voluntary.

The following activities of VLUHR QA have to be addressed in the external review:

Since 2015 VLUHR QA coordinates the 1) **assessments of new study programmes**, 2) **joint programmes** and 3) **programmes in an improvement process of universities and university colleges**. VLUHR QA also coordinates 4) **the programme assessments of registered institutions**. The assessment comprises a self-assessment report, a site visit, an evaluation by an independent panel of experts using a set of predefined standards and the publication of the panel's findings. The programmes use the assessment report to apply for accreditation with the accreditation organisation NVAO.

The following activities of VLUHR QA are not included in the external review:

As a consequence of the decree of 2015, VLUHR QA can share 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 that VLUHR QA provides is demand-driven and is different from one institution to another. These activities do not refer to the typical terminology as evaluation, assessment, review or audit. Current supporting activities are e.g. the selection and training of experts and acting as an external secretary. Furthermore, VLUHR QA shares its expertise with organizations other than universities and university colleges, such as NVAO, VVS, MUSIQUE, ENQA, FPS Health. Current supporting activities are e.g. the establishment of assessment frameworks, carrying out a SWOT analysis and acting as an external secretary. These activities are also demand-driven and do not fall within the scope of the ESG.

3. The Review Process

The process is designed in the light of the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* and in line with the requirements of the *EQAR Procedures for Applications*.

The evaluation procedure consists of the following steps:

- Formulation of the Terms of Reference and protocol for the review;
- Nomination and appointment of the review panel;
- Self-assessment by VLUHR QA including the preparation of a self-assessment report;
- A site visit by the review panel to VLUHR QA;
- Preparation and completion of the final evaluation report by the review panel;
- Scrutiny of the final evaluation report by the ENQA Review Committee;
- Analysis of the scrutiny by the ENQA Board and their decision regarding ENQA membership;
- Follow-up of the panel's and/or ENQA Board's recommendations by the agency, including a voluntary follow-up visit.

3.1 Nomination and appointment of the review team members

The review panel consists of four members: one or two quality assurance experts, an academic employed by a higher education institution and student member. One of the members will serve as the chair of the review panel, and another member as a review secretary. For ENQA Agency Reviews at least one of the reviewers is an ENQA nominee (most often the QA professional[s]). At least one of the reviewers is appointed from the nominees of either the European University Association (EUA) or

the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), and the student member is always selected from among the ESU-nominated reviewers.

In addition to the four members, the panel will be supported by the ENQA Secretariat review coordinator who will monitor the integrity of the process and ensure that ENQA expectations are met throughout the process. The ENQA staff member will not be the Secretary of the review and will not participate in the discussions during the site visit interviews.

Current members of the ENQA Board are not eligible to serve as reviewers.

ENQA will provide VLUHR QA with the list of suggested experts with their respective curriculum vitae to establish that there are no known conflicts of interest. The experts will have to sign a non-conflict of interest statement as regards VLUHR QA review.

3.2 Self-assessment by VLUHR QA, including the preparation of a self-assessment report

VLUHR QA is responsible for the execution and organisation of its own self-assessment process and shall take into account the following guidance:

- Self-assessment is organised as a project with a clearly defined schedule and includes all relevant internal and external stakeholders;
- The self-assessment report is broken down by the topics of the evaluation and is expected to contain, among others: a brief description of the national HE and QA system; background description of the current situation of the Agency; an analysis and appraisal of the current situation; proposals for improvement and measures already planned; a SWOT analysis; each criterion (ESG part II and III) addressed individually. All agency's QA activities (whether within their national jurisdiction or outside of it, and whether obligatory or voluntary) will be described and their compliance with the ESG analysed.
- The report is well-structured, concise and comprehensively prepared. It clearly demonstrates the extent to which VLUHR QA fulfils its tasks of external quality assurance and meets the ESG and thus the requirements of ENQA membership.
- The self-assessment report is submitted to the ENQA Secretariat who has 4 weeks to pre-scrutinise it before forwarding the report to the panel of experts. The purpose of the pre-scrutiny is to ensure that the self-assessment report is satisfactory for the consideration of the panel. The Secretariat will not judge the content of information itself but whether the necessary information, as stated in the Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews, is present. For the second and subsequent reviews, the agency is expected to enlist the recommendations provided in the previous review and to outline actions taken to meet these recommendations. In case the self-assessment report does not contain the necessary information and fails to respect the requested form and content, the ENQA Secretariat reserves the right to reject the report and ask for a revised version within 4 weeks. In such cases, an additional fee of 1000 € will be charged to the agency.
- The report is submitted to the review panel a minimum of six weeks prior to the site visit.

3.3 A Site Visit by the Review Panel

VLUHR QA will draw up a draft proposal of the schedule for the site visit to be submitted to the review panel at least two months before the planned dates of the visit. The schedule includes an indicative timetable of the meetings and other exercises to be undertaken by the review panel during the site visit, the duration of which is 2,5 days. The approved schedule shall be given to VLUHR QA at least one month before the site visit, in order to properly organise the requested interviews.

The review panel will be assisted by VLUHR QA in arriving in Brussels, Belgium.

The site visit will close with a final de-briefing meeting outlining the panel's overall impressions but not its judgement on compliance or granting of ENQA membership.

3.4 Preparation and completion of the final evaluation report

On the basis of the review panel's findings, the review secretary will draft the report in consultation with the review panel. The report will take into account the purpose and scope of the evaluation as defined under articles 2 and 2.1. It will also provide a clear rationale for its findings with regards to each ESG. A draft will be first submitted to the ENQA review coordinator who will check the report for consistency, clarity and language and it will be then submitted to VLUHR QA within 11 weeks of the site visit for comment on factual accuracy. If VLUHR QA chooses to provide a statement in reference to the draft report it will be submitted to the chair of the review panel within two weeks after the receipt of the draft report. Thereafter the review panel will take into account the statement by VLUHR QA, finalise the document and submit it to ENQA.

The report is to be finalised within three months of the site visit and will not exceed 40 pages in length.

When preparing the report, the review panel should also bear in mind the *EQAR Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG*, so as to ensure that the report will contain sufficient information for the Register Committee for application to EQAR.

VLUHR QA is also requested to provide a letter addressed to the ENQA Board outlining its motivation applying for membership and the ways in which VLUHR QA expects to contribute to the work and objectives of ENQA during its membership. This letter will be discussed along with the final evaluation report.

4. Follow-up Process and Publication of the Report

VLUHR QA will consider the expert panel's report and will publish it on its website once the ENQA Board has made its decision. The report will also be published on the ENQA website, regardless of the review outcome and decision by the ENQA Board. VLUHR QA commits to preparing a follow-up plan in which it addresses the recommendations of the review panel and to submitting a follow-up report to the ENQA Board. The follow-up report will be published on the ENQA website, in addition to the full review report and the Board's decision.

The follow-up report will be complemented by a small-scale visit to the agency performed by two members of the original panel (whenever possible). This visit will be used to discuss issues, based on the ESG, considered as of particular importance or challenge by VLUHR QA. Its purpose is entirely developmental and has no impact on the judgement of membership and/or compliance of the agency with the ESG. Should the agency not wish to take advantage of this opportunity, it may opt out by informing the ENQA Review Coordinator about this.

5. Use of the report

ENQA shall retain ownership of the report. The intellectual property of all works created by the expert panel in connection with the review contract, including specifically any written reports, shall be vested in ENQA.

The review report is used by the Board of ENQA for the purpose of reaching a conclusion on whether VLUHR QA has met the ESG and can be thus admitted/reconfirmed as a member of ENQA. The report will also be used for registration on EQAR, and is designed so as to serve these two purposes. However,

the review report is to be considered final only after being approved by the ENQA Board. Once submitted to VLUHR QA and ENQA and until it is approved by the Board the report may not be used or relied upon by VLUHR QA, the panel and any third party and may not be disclosed without the prior written consent of ENQA. VLUHR QA may use the report at its discretion only after the Board has approved of the report. The approval of the report is independent of the decision on membership.

The Chair of the panel shall remain available to respond to questions of clarification or further information from the EQAR Register Committee provided that the ENQA Secretariat is copied in all such requests.

6. Budget

VLUHR QA shall pay the following review related fees:

Fee of the Chair	4,500 EUR
Fee of the Secretary	4,500 EUR
Fee of the 2 other panel members	4,000 EUR (2,000 EUR each)
Fee of 2 panel members for follow-up visit	1,000 EUR (500 EUR each)
Administrative overhead for ENQA Secretariat	7,000 EUR
Experts Training fund	1,400 EUR
Approximate travel and subsistence expenses	6,000 EUR
Travel and subsistence expenses follow-up visit	1,600 EUR

This gives a total indicative cost of 30,000.00 EUR VAT excl. for a review team of 4 members. In the case that the allowance for travel and subsistence expenses is exceeded, VLUHR QA will cover any additional costs after the completion of the review. However, the ENQA Secretariat will endeavour to keep the travel and subsistence expenses in the limits of the planned budget, and will refund the difference to VLUHR QA if the travel and subsistence expenses go under budget.

The fee of the follow-up visit is included in the overall cost of the review and will not be reimbursed in case the agency does not wish to benefit from it.

In the event of a second site visit required by the Board and aiming at completing the assessment of compliance, and should the agency accept a second visit, an additional fee of 500 EUR per expert, as well as travel and subsistence costs are recoverable from the agency.

7. Indicative Schedule of the Review

Agreement on terms of reference	July/August 2018
Appointment of review panel members	February 2019
Self-assessment completed	By 1 st of March 2019
Pre-screening of SAR by ENQA coordinator	March 2019
Preparation of site visit schedule and indicative timetable	April 2019
Briefing of review panel members	May 2019
Review panel site visit	Early June 2019

Draft of evaluation report and submitting it to ENQA coordinator for pre-screening	By the end of July 2019
Draft of evaluation report to VLUHR QA	August 2019
Statement of VLUHR QA to review panel if necessary	August/Early September 2019
Submission of final report to ENQA	By Mid-September 2019
Consideration of the report by ENQA Board and response of VLUHR QA	October 2019
Publication of the report	October 2019

ANNEX 3: GLOSSARY

ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ESG	<i>Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, 2015</i>
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register
HE	higher education
HEI	higher education institution
NVAO	Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders
QA	quality assurance
SAR	self-assessment report
VLHORA	Flemish Council of Universities of Applied Sciences and Arts
VLIR	Flemish Interuniversity Council
VLUHR	Flemish Higher Education Council

ANNEX 4. DOCUMENTS TO SUPPORT THE REVIEW

DOCUMENTS PROVIDED BY VLUHR QA

- Self-assessment report by VLUHR QA
- Annex 1 Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education
- Annex 2 Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes
- Annex 3 Complaints procedure
- Annex 4 Follow-up procedure
- Annex 5 Code of ethics for project managers/ secretaries (in Dutch)
- Annex 6 Code of ethics concerning the projects (in Dutch)
- Annex 7 Governance (in Dutch)
- Annex 8 Strategic plan
- Presentation slides: Quality Assurance in Flanders: Timeline
- Structural scheme/ description which shows the relation between governing bodies of VLUHR QA
- VLUHR Budget (2015, 2016, 2017, 2018)
- Price list for assessment procedures
- Description: a detailed look at study programmes
- Professionaliseringsbeleid VLUHR QA (in Dutch)
- International participation of VLUHR QA (in Dutch)
- Results of surveys for panel members and institutions (in Dutch)
- Focus groups results (in Dutch)
- Statistics on the number of assessment procedures by the type of assessment
- VLUHR Statutes (in Dutch)
- Decree of the Flemish Government from 2015 (in Dutch)
- Example of a timeline for assessment procedure
- Statistics of review experts by countries represented
- Agenda of the experts training
- Form of the checklist used by the experts during site-visit
- Information about any differences in the final opinion of the expert panel and decision by NVAO
- Description of the relationship between VLUHR QA and NVAO
- The profile of VLUHR QA staff members
- VLUHR QA Quality manual (available during the site visit)
- Meeting minutes of VLUHR QA (available during the site visit)
- Meeting minutes of VLUHR Board (available during the site visit)
- Meeting minutes of Advisory Council (available during the site visit)
- Examples of self-assessment reports which include follow-up on recommendations (available during the site visit)
- Examples of experts reports (available during the site visit)

OTHER SOURCES USED BY THE REVIEW PANEL

VLUHR QA website: www.vluhr.be



THIS REPORT presents findings of the ENQA Agency Review of the Flemish Higher Education Council - Quality Assurance, undertaken in 2019.



2019 ENQA AGENCY REVIEW