Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education

AUGUST 2013
GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This document describes the assessment protocol used by VLUHR Quality Assurance (VLUHR QA) for assessments of study programmes offered by universities, university colleges and other statutory registered higher education institutions. On request VLUHR QA also uses this assessment protocol for study programmes offered by non-statutory registered institutions or for other study programmes that submit a request to VLUHR QA.

The manual is intended for use by both the study programmes and institutions involved as well as for the assessment panels.

CHAPTER 1 QUALITY ASSURANCE AND QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEMS

1.1 QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: DEVELOPMENT, STRUCTURE AND AIM

There has been a growing interest in quality assurance in higher education in Europe since the 1980s. That interest has also been reflected in the Flemish higher education system. Although quality has been on the agenda for universities and university colleges for many years, until the early 1990s virtually no systematic and/or formalised approach to quality was adopted by the government or by institutions. As a result, few formal guarantees were offered that education would be of a high quality. In the past quality was rather seen as a self-evident consequence of the commitment of the individuals involved and in particular of the teaching staff.

The late 1980s and early 1990s, however, were a turning point for quality assurance in higher education. During this period a process called ‘internal quality assurance’ was developed. This meant that higher education institutions began to devote more attention to thorough self-evaluation of the quality that they deliver. In Flanders, the universities and university colleges set up such internal quality assurance systems, partly with a view to gaining greater autonomy from the government.

In Flanders, first for universities and later for university colleges, a more systematic approach to quality assurance emerged in the form of assessments. This meant that the study programme was not solely responsible for evaluating its own quality but that an independent panel of peers (experts in a specific discipline) assessed the quality of the education (and the research). This process is referred to as ‘external quality assurance’.

The following functions of external quality assurance can be identified:

- **Improvement and assurance function**: the use of external quality assurance outcomes as a tool to allow the institution itself to improve and consolidate the quality of its own teaching.
- **Accountability function**: the use of external quality assurance outcomes as a source of information for the government and for society. This means rendering account to society at large for the efficient and effective use of public funds. It also means generating information for students, their parents and employers, in the form of public reports, on the extent to which study programmes meet quality standards. This is often associated with the introduction of ‘accreditation’ (see below).

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1 Further on in the text, reference is made to ‘universities and university colleges’, which refers to all statutory registered institutions.
• Regulation of the higher education system: the use of external quality assurance outcomes to create links with specific consequences in terms of guidance and regulation. Quality indicators are used as parameters, for example to make decisions on the teaching competences of institutions, the assignment of new study programmes, the allocation of funding between education and research etc.

1.2 GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

1.2.1. BEFORE 2005: ON-SITE VISITS AIMED AT IMPROVEMENT

A system of external quality assurance has been operating in Flemish universities since 1991 and in university colleges since 1995, after the large-scale merger operation that took place between university colleges at that time.

The first generation of on-site visits clearly put the emphasis on quality improvement. The importance of the results of the assessment is derived from the authority of the panel of peers. This panel - based on its knowledge of the discipline - conducts a visit to the study programme on the basis of a self-evaluation report written by the study programme. It interviews the stakeholders of the study programme and its work culminates in a public assessment report which focuses mostly on areas with potential for improvement. The assessments are therefore carried out from a comparative perspective. This means that an assessment panel visits and assesses a cluster of study programmes which are similar in terms of content at the various institutions during the same period of time and then sets out its findings from a comparative perspective so that study programmes can learn from each other.

Ownership of and responsibility for the organization of this external quality assessment process lay with the institutions themselves. Coordination of these activities became the responsibility of the umbrella bodies VLIR (for universities) and VLHORA (for university colleges). The whole system was supervised by the authority which evaluated the way in which quality was ensured in university colleges and universities and checked the extent to which the institutions incorporated the outcomes of the quality assessment process into their own policies.

The disadvantage of a system based to such a large extent on trust and quality improvement is the lack of sanctions or reward mechanisms depending on whether the results of the external assessment are translated into improvement measures or not. This was also the reason for the transition to a system that offers more robust guarantees that the improvement points would be followed up.

1.2.2. 2005-2013: ON-SITE VISITS AIMED AT IMPROVEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY, AND ALSO AT ACCREDITATION

The second-generation external quality assurance system continued to build on the previous system of internal and external quality assurance in university colleges and universities. Ownership of the external quality assurance process was retained by the institutions, with VLIR and VLHORA as the coordinating bodies. Assessments were also carried out from a comparative perspective between 2005 and 2013. The second-generation external quality assurance system, however, differs from the first-generation system in two ways:

• In addition to improvement, the assessments are now focused more on accountability. In other words, an assessment panel no longer expresses its findings in terms of strong and weak points, but assesses the study programmes in terms of six quality standards: aims and objectives, curriculum, staff, services, internal quality assurance and results. These themes are further subdivided into aspects and criteria. The study programme has to achieve a sufficiently high score for all quality standards. In second-generation external quality assurance, the assessment panel therefore plays a dual role: it carries out assessments and also makes quality improvement recommendations.

• The external quality assurance section is extended to include an accreditation section, a process which can be described in the most generic sense as a formal, public statement made by an independent body.
on the basis of a quality assessment to the effect that certain previously agreed standards are being met. Flanders has opted to align with the accreditation system used in the Netherlands. The regulations have been harmonised with each other as far as possible to that effect. Binational collaboration in the area of accreditation has resulted in the foundation of the Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders (see below). Unlike the previous generation of quality assurance systems, in accreditation the emphasis is on quality as the fulfilment of generic standards. In more concrete terms, it is expected for accreditation that study programmes are guaranteed to meet agreed fundamental quality standards (while leaving sufficient scope for internal reference frameworks and profiling). With the introduction of accreditation, Flanders came into line with existing European trends. The introduction of accreditation offers better opportunities to harmonise quality assurance standards, criteria and procedures at international level and thus to promote international mobility and international recognition of qualifications.

Both elements have resulted in the accountability function becoming more important. The scope of the assessment framework, however, led to a risk that the entire process would become excessively bureaucratic. Without wishing to relinquish the benefits of the accountability perspective, a system was therefore sought that would offer a more in-depth assessment of study programmes with a greater focus on the content and results than on the processes and procedures within the study programmes that were assessed. At the same time an attempt was also made to obtain a view of the wider educational policy (identical for all study programmes) at institutional level. In the next round (2013-2021) a system is therefore being set up in which study programme accreditation is combined with ‘institutional reviews’.

**1.2.3. 2013-2021: STUDY PROGRAMME ASSESSMENT AND ACCREDITATION COMBINED WITH INSTITUTIONAL REVIEWS**

The institutional review is a new element in the accreditation system. This institutional review is compulsory for all statutory registered institutions in Flanders. The institutional review is a periodical assessment by an external panel of the policy processes that are put in place by a higher education institution to guarantee that it is carrying out its teaching duties to a high standard of quality. The review panel also includes in this the policymaking processes that have been set up by the institution to support the teaching that it provides in its study programmes on the basis of its tasks in the areas of research and its public and scientific remit. The institutional review process is coordinated by the Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO: see below).

The study programme assessment and accreditation processes are more directly oriented than previously to aspects related to the primary teaching and learning process. The 6 quality standards and 21 aspects from the previous framework have been cut down to essentials: an independent, expert, authoritative assessment panel has to express an opinion on three key questions:

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

This Educational On-site visits Manual sets out the arrangements for carrying out study programme assessments. Coordination of these activities is the responsibility of the Flemish Higher Education Council (VLUHR). The VLUHR delegates all decisions on the selection and ratification of assessment panels to the independent VLUHR QA Board. After the assessment process has been completed, NVAO makes decisions on accreditation of the study programme, on the basis of the published assessment report (see also Chapter 5 of this Manual).

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2 These are the institutions that are eligible to receive government funding for their teaching and research. For institutions which are not statutory registered bodies, and which obtain their registration on the basis of an application submitted to the Flemish Government, it is not compulsory to undergo an institutional review.
1.3. **The Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO)**

In Flanders, the **treaty** between the Netherlands and Flanders and the **Higher Education Act** of 4 April 2003 constitute the legislative basis for the introduction of accreditation and the activities of NVAO. The Higher Education Act stipulates that Bachelor’s and Master’s programmes can only be offered if they are accredited for the duration stipulated in the accreditation decision, or if they are recognised as new study programmes (art. 56 §1).

In the context of the assessment of existing study programmes, NVAO has worked with the Flemish Government on developing an accreditation framework. This framework describes the principles on the basis of which NVAO makes accreditation decisions. To that end it stipulates:

- which elements must, as a minimum, be assessed in the published external assessment;
- what requirements are made in terms of the selection of an assessment panel and the conduct of the assessment process;
- how and according to which decision-making rules NVAO makes a decision;
- how a study programme applies for accreditation.

In order to be eligible for accreditation, the study programme must meet all the generic quality standards. NVAO bases its opinion on a published external assessment.

The accreditation period is in principle eight years.

NVAO is also responsible for conducting institutional reviews of Flemish higher education institutions and for evaluating the potential quality of new Bachelor’s and Master’s programmes.

1.4. **Characteristics of Accreditation in Flanders**

In summary, the characteristics of accreditation in Flanders are as follows:

- Study programmes provided within the Flemish higher education system are subject to accreditation; higher education institutions undergo an institutional review but they are not accredited.
- The accreditation decision is based on the assessment report as a source of information.
- Accreditation must be requested from NVAO.
- The results of the assessment and accreditation are public.
- NVAO may make three types of decisions; it may decide to grant or not to grant accreditation to a study programme, or to grant it for a limited period.
- In the event of a decision to grant accreditation for a limited period, the institution’s board may have a new, external assessment carried out on the generic quality standards on which the study programme (or a different mode of study) was not assessed as satisfactory.
- A positive accreditation decision is, in principle, valid for a period of eight years.

1.5. **Structure of the Manual**
The outline structure of this manual, a written record of the VLUHR assessment protocol which is itself harmonised with the accreditation requirements, follows the four main phases of the assessment and accreditation process.

These phases are as follows, each with reference to the relevant chapters:

**PHASE 1**
Writing the self-evaluation report (chapter 2) and selecting the assessment panel (chapter 3)

- The stakeholders of the study programme to be assessed carry out a critical self-assessment.
- The results of this self-assessment are set down in a self-evaluation report.
- VLUHR selects an assessment panel, in consultation with the study programmes to be assessed.

**PHASE 2**
The actual assessment by the assessment panel (chapter 4)

- The self-evaluation report is studied by the assessment panel.
- The assessment panel continues to prepare for the assessment during the preparatory meeting.
- The assessment panel visits the study programmes. During this process:
  - interviews are carried out with members of the various groups involved in the study programme;
  - available materials are studied on location;
  - facilities are visited;
  - verbal reporting takes place on the provisional findings, conclusions and recommendations.

**PHASE 3**
Publication of the public assessment report (chapter 4)

- The opinions and recommendations of the assessment panel are set down in an assessment report.
- The recommendations of the assessment panel are followed up by the study programme.

**PHASE 4**
Submission of the accreditation request to NVAO by the board of the institution and decision by NVAO three months after receipt of the request (chapter 5).

- Within a period of two months after publication of the assessment report and no later than four months before expiry of the study programme's current accreditation, the institution's board submits a request for accreditation to NVAO (consisting of basic details on the study programme and the assessment report).
- NVAO evaluates the assessment report produced by the assessment panel and the overall opinion set out in it, and compares the report against the study programme accreditation framework.
- Within three months of receipt of the accreditation request, NVAO makes a decision on whether to award the (re-)accreditation.
CHAPTER 2  SELF-EVALUATION PROCESS

2.1. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

In order to permit a robust assessment of the study programme, the required information about the study programme is gathered before the on-site visit by the panel, in the form of a brief, critical self-evaluation report. The self-evaluation report has a dual purpose:

- on the one hand it serves as a primary information source for the panel in preparing for the on-site visit, during its interviews with the stakeholders and when assessing the study programme;
- the process of preparing for and writing the self-evaluation report is also intended to stimulate internal consultation within the study programme and thus its own internal quality assurance.

2.2. GENERAL STRUCTURE

The assessment is carried out on the basis of a discussion with ‘peers’ and other experts on the content and quality of the study programme and essentially provides answers to three core questions:

1. What is the aim of the study programme?
2. How does the study programme achieve it?
3. To what extent are the objectives met?

In the case of non-statutory registered institutions, which are not subject to institutional review, a fourth question is also asked on the structure and organization of internal quality assurance.

The self-evaluation report is deemed to be the result of a process of joint and structured consultation and must offer a critical, analytical and future-oriented reflection on the study programme as a whole.

2.2.1. JOINT AND STRUCTURED

The self-evaluation report is viewed during the assessment process as a document supported by all those involved in the study programme. It is therefore important that all the groups that play an active part in the study programme should be involved in drafting the self-evaluation report and that existing points of disagreement should be disclosed and indicated as such in the report.

The report itself follows the generic quality standards set out in the assessment framework. More details about the content of the report will be provided in § 2.3.

2.2.2. CRITICAL, ANALYTICAL AND FUTURE-ORIENTED

The self-evaluation report demonstrates how and to what extent the study programme considers that it provides the generic quality standards set out in the assessment framework. Both strong and weak points are discussed for each generic quality standard. The discussion must not be limited to a list of facts, but must clearly contain an analysis. The study programme is also expected, when discussing the generic quality standards, to provide an explicit indication of actions to improve quality assurance at study programme level, including follow-up of the recommendations of the previous assessment panel, insofar as these are linked to the generic quality standards.

As well as a critical view of both the past and the present situation, the self-evaluation report must also offer a clear picture of the ambitions of the study programme. How does the study programme seek to deal with possible difficulties, and how does it intend to continue to ensure its own development in future?
2.2.3. THE STUDY PROGRAMME AS A WHOLE
The self-evaluation report focuses on the individual study programme in its entirety (Bachelor’s / advanced Bachelor’s / Master’s / advanced Master’s). In every case, overlap between the content of this report and the institutional review must be avoided. The structure of the quality assurance system or personnel policy, for example, are covered by the institutional review. References to conditions determined at faculty, departmental or institutional level are only made if they are directly relevant to the core of the study programme.

In the case of joint programmes (organised between Flemish institutions or with institutions outside the Flemish Community) which result in a joint qualification, the self-evaluation report must include information on those parts of the study programme that are provided in the other Flemish institutions or abroad. In this case the self-evaluation report therefore still covers the study programme as a whole.

Sufficient specific information must also be provided in the self-evaluation report on the different modes of study of the study programme (art. 59 bis §1 of the aforementioned Higher Education Act) in which a study programme is offered.

It goes without saying that in all cases sufficient information must be present for all the study programmes to permit a separate assessment to be carried out for each study programme or mode of study.

2.2.4. OTHER STIPULATIONS

Language
The self-evaluation report is drafted in the official study programme language. Exceptions to this general rule are discussed with VLUHR QA (e.g. if an institution wishes to have an international panel assess the study programme).

Form
As a general rule, for a Bachelor’s programme and a Master’s programme that follows on directly from it, a single self-evaluation report is always produced. A single self-evaluation report is also produced for a study programme with different modes of study. In other cases, a separate self-evaluation report is submitted. Exceptions to this may be made in discussion between the study programme/institution and VLUHR QA.

Length
A self-evaluation report on a single study programme is a maximum of 10,000 words in length, including the introduction and excluding the compulsory appendices. Discretionary appendices are only accepted if these are essential in order to understand (an element of) the study programme correctly and they are limited to a total of 25 pages.

The maximum length of a self-evaluation report covering a Bachelor’s programme and a Master’s programme that directly follows it, is 20,000 words; in this case the discretionary appendices amount to a maximum of 50 pages. The maximum length of a self-evaluation report covering a study programme with different modes of study, regardless of the number of study modes, is 20,000 words. For each mode of study of a study programme a maximum of 5 pages of extra discretionary appendices may be added.

If, as is the case for non-statutory registered institutions, information also has to be provided on the structure and organization of internal quality assurance (see below under generic quality standard 4), the self-evaluation report may be extended by a maximum of 6,000 words.

If a study programme requests assessment of a distinctive quality feature, the maximum length of this chapter is 2,000 words.

Submission
The report must be printed and submitted to VLUHR QA. An electronic, editable version must be sent to the project manager / secretary of VLUHR QA. The reports must reach VLUHR QA on 15 December or 1 July at the latest, as indicated in the timeline (www.vluhr.be/kwaliteitszorg).

Reports that do not satisfy the conditions set out under § 2.2.4 or do not contain all the compulsory appendices (see § 2.3) are returned to the study programme for supplementation or amendment. The adapted self-evaluation report or the missing appendices must be submitted to VLUHR QA within 10 working days.
2.2.5. INFORMATION MEETING
For each cluster of study programmes that are assessed together, or for each group of assessment clusters, VLUHR QA organises an information meeting, preferably one year before the final submission date. More detailed information is provided at this meeting on the structure and progress of a study programme assessment. This meeting also includes a detailed discussion of the self-evaluation and the specificities of the study programme(s).

2.3. CONTENT

The self-evaluation report is a document that stands alone and can be read independently. It follows the generic quality standards set out in the NVAO study programme assessment framework. The study programme is explicitly encouraged to use the available space to create its own emphases within the boundaries of the assessment framework. In doing this it is necessary to focus on the essence and the specific character of the study programme.

When writing the self-evaluation report, overlaps with the institutional review must be avoided. The emphasis is on ‘fitness for purpose’: if it is necessary to refer to policies at institutional or faculty level, this is only done for policies concerning the study programme in question and the results at study programme level. Issues relating to the institutional context, such as the structure of quality assurance within the institution or its personnel policy do not belong here, since these are covered by the institutional review.

The generic quality standards and the associated criteria from the assessment framework are set out below. For each generic quality standard, the self-evaluation report must demonstrate how and to what extent the study programme considers that it meets the requirement. In doing this the stipulations referred to under § 2.2 concerning critical-analytical content, future orientation and focus must be taken into account.

Under each generic quality standard and the associated criteria, a point by point summary is provided for the study programme setting out the different elements in the generic quality standard and the relevant criteria. The points that are summarised make explicit what is already prescribed by the generic quality standard and the associated criteria, and they should not be seen as supplementary criteria. The elements that are summarised serve as aids to the study programme when drafting the self-evaluation report.

For each generic quality standard, a summary of the compulsory appendices is also provided. In addition to the compulsory appendices, additional documents must be presented for perusal during the on-site visit (see 4.2.2). Notes in the text of the report refer to the relevant appendices. The text of the report explains these appendices or summarises the main points derived from them, without repeating the contents of the appendices in full.

The self-evaluation report also includes an introduction and a conclusion. The introduction always deals with the way in which the self-evaluation report was produced. It addresses the allocation of tasks and the contributions of those involved. The organizational and historical aspects of the study programme are also outlined, highlighting the vision of the specific character of the study programme. The conclusion summarises the most important strengths of the study programme, points for attention and fundamental future policy options and ambitions of the study programme.

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**Introduction**

- Creation of the self-evaluation report
• Organizational and administrative context of the study programme
• Historical context and description of the specific character of the study programme

**Compulsory appendix:**
• administrative details sheet (Printout of the “general information” details from the Higher Education Register [HOR], as they are recorded in the Register at the time when the self-evaluation report is written is sufficient);
• organization chart of the study programme and the competent administrative bodies.

The following elements must be described in the self-evaluation report. The study programme is free to determine where this is described:

• admissions policy (conditions for admission, intake profile and intake guidance);
• policy in relation to internationalisation.

**Compulsory appendix:** Summary of the most important activities of the study programme in relation to internationalisation, in accordance with the vision of the study programme, with as a minimum mobility on the basis of internationally accepted definitions (max. 2 pages).³

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**Generic quality standard 1 - Targeted outcome level**
The targeted outcome level is determined on the basis of the way in which the discipline-specific learning outcomes are translated into programme-specific learning outcomes.

**Criteria:** The targeted programme-specific learning outcomes are appropriate to the level and orientation (Bachelor’s or Master’s; professional or academic orientation) within the Flemish qualification framework and, if available, the validated discipline-specific learning outcomes framework. They match the current requirements which are made in terms of the programme content from an international perspective by the professional field and discipline specialists.

**Self-evaluation report - Explain:**
• If a validated discipline-specific learning outcomes framework is available in the context of the Flemish Qualification Framework⁴:
  - explain the extent to which learning outcomes for the programme are harmonised with the validated discipline-specific learning outcomes framework in the context of the Flemish Qualification Framework;
  - explain the profile of the programme itself in relation to the discipline-specific learning outcomes framework.
• If no validated discipline-specific learning outcomes framework is available in the context of the Flemish Qualification Framework⁵

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³ The definitions in relation to mobility are still to be determined by the government. Pending this, when submitting figures on student mobility the programmes may use the “Guide to providing the compulsory annex on internationalisation - section mobility (students) on the basis of internationally accepted definitions” (which can be found (in Dutch) at www.vluhr.be - Quality Assurance).

⁴ If a validated discipline-specific learning outcomes framework is available in the context of the Flemish Qualification Framework, this provides the point of reference for the assessment panel.

⁵ If a validated discipline-specific learning outcomes framework in the context of the Flemish Qualification Framework is not available (or not available in time), the assessment panel will draft a reference framework explicitly setting out its
Targeted learning outcomes for the programme, viz.:
- explain the extent to which the learning outcomes for the programme are harmonised with the Flemish Qualification Framework;
- explain the extent to which the learning outcomes are harmonised with the requirements imposed by the (international) discipline;
- explain the extent to which the learning outcomes are harmonised with requirements imposed by the (international) professional context;
- explain the specific profile of the programme.

Critical reflection and future prospects.

Compulsory appendices:
- Comparative summary of the programme-specific learning outcomes related to the validated discipline-specific learning outcomes if available, and/or in relation to the Flemish Qualification Structure.

Generic quality standard 2 - Teaching process:
The teaching process makes it possible for the students to achieve the targeted learning outcomes.

Criteria: The content and structure of the curriculum, including the programme-specific teaching and learning methods, enable the students to achieve the targeted learning outcomes. The staff quality and staff numbers and the quality of programme-specific facilities are essential to this. The curriculum, the staff and the facilities make up a coherent educational learning environment for students. The student progression rate is an indicator of this. The improvement measures carried out by quality assurance at study programme level are included in this, including follow-up of the previous assessment.

Self-evaluation report - Explain:
- The content and structure of the curriculum, in particular:
  - explanation of the general structure and organization (bearing in mind cohesion and practicability of the curriculum);
  - explanation of the student progression rate;
  - explanation of the relationship between (the parts of) the curriculum and the targeted learning outcomes;
  - explanation of the teaching and learning methods used, paying attention to the way in which these contribute to the achievement of the targeted learning outcomes .
- The staff quality and staff numbers linked to the study programme, specifically:
  - explanation of the subject content, educational, teaching, technical etc expertise of the staff (taking into account the different categories of staff) in relation to the curriculum and the targeted learning outcomes;
  - explanation of the staff numbers, also related to student numbers, in relation to the curriculum and the targeted learning outcomes.
- Programme-specific facilities, namely:
  - explanation of the programme-specific study and study pathway guidance provided, based on the student intake, student progression rate and targeted learning outcomes;
  - explanation of programme-specific physical facilities (library, laboratories, study areas etc.) in relation to the curriculum and the targeted learning outcomes.
- Actions taken to improve quality assurance at study programme level, in particular(*):

discipline-specific minimum requirements. This reference framework will be available one month before the on-site visit.
- explanation of recently taken improvement measures;
- explanation of the way in which the results of the previous assessment were followed up in the framework of the generic quality standards.

(*) For study programmes provided by non-statutory registered institutions, this element is included under Generic quality standard 4.

**Critical reflection and future prospects.**

**Compulsory appendices:**
- comparative overview of course units in relation to programme-specific learning outcomes;
- schematic overview of the curriculum, indicating the number of credits awarded for each part of the study programme;
- ECTS sheets (link to the relevant web page is sufficient);
- intake data, student progression rate data and total student numbers (tables provided by the Higher Education Database [DHO]);
- number of staff deployed, analysed by appointment category (based on the tables at [http://www.vluhr.be/kwaliteitszorg](http://www.vluhr.be/kwaliteitszorg));
- list of recently implemented improvement measures, including follow-up of improvements suggested by the previous assessment panel.

**Generic quality standard 3 - Outcome level achieved**
The study programme has an appropriate system of assessment, testing and examination and demonstrates that the targeted learning outcomes are achieved.

**Criteria:** The level achieved is evident from the validity, reliability and transparency of the assessment, testing and examination of students, the employability of graduates or the progression to a follow-up programme and from the pass rate of each intake cohort.

**Self-evaluation report - Explain:**
- The system of assessment, testing and examination; in particular:
  - explanation of the types of assessment used in relation to the targeted learning outcomes;
  - explanation of the method of ensuring the quality of testing (validity and reliability);
  - explanation of the way in which communication takes place on forms of assessment (transparency).
- The quality of dissertations (Master’s theses for Master’s programmes / other forms of final assessment such as Bachelor’s examinations, practical training reports, dissertations etc.).
- The suitability of graduates for employment in the labour market or progression to a follow-up programme.
- The pass rate for each intake cohort.

**Critical reflection and future prospects**

**Compulsory appendices:**
- teaching and examination regulations (a link to the relevant web page is sufficient);
- list of titles of 30 dissertations (representative for any mode of study of the study programme and for the marks obtained) over the past three years (or portfolios / projects from which the learning outcome achieved by the student can be derived) stating the marks obtained. On the basis of this list, each panel member will select and review two projects prior to the on-site visit;
- the length of study until obtaining the qualification for each intake cohort and the average study duration for each graduating cohort (table provided by DHO).
Generic quality standard 4 - Structure and organization of internal quality assurance*

The structure and organization of internal quality assurance is aimed at systematic improvement of the study programme in which the relevant stakeholders are involved.

* Generic quality standard 4 is only applicable to study programmes at institutions which are non-statutory registered bodies. These are not subject to institutional review. The improvement measures carried out by quality assurance for these study programmes are discussed not under the second generic quality standard but under this fourth generic quality standard.

Criteria: The study programme is assessed periodically, partly on the basis of measurable targets. The outcomes of this assessment form the basis for demonstrable improvement measures which contribute towards achievement of the targets. The staff, students, alumni and potential employers (the professional field) are actively involved in the internal quality assurance.

Self-evaluation report - Explain:
- The internal quality assurance system, in particular:
  - explanation of the tools used (bearing in mind frequency and methodology);
  - explanation of the measurable targets used;
  - explanation of the involvement of staff, students, alumni and potential employers.
- Improvement measures introduced, namely:
  - explanation of the most notable improvement measures carried out recently;
  - explanation of the way in which the results of the previous assessment were followed up.

Critical reflection and future prospects.

Compulsory appendices:
- Anonymised summary of recent assessment results;
- List of improvement measures carried out recently;
- List of suggestions for improvement from the previous assessment, indicating the follow-up that has taken place.

Conclusion
- Key strengths of the study programme and points requiring attention
- Fundamental future policy options

Information available during the on-site visit (compulsory):
- reports of discussions in relevant panels/bodies;
- representative selection of manuals / study materials;
- indications of staff competences depending on the type of study programme (for academic study programmes: a selection of publications; for professional and artistic study programmes, specific agreements will be made on this at the information meeting);
- the panel will select testing and assessment assignments which it wishes to study before the on-site visit. The panel will also indicate which testing and assessment assignments it additionally wishes to inspect during the visit;
- the dissertations not selected by the panel from the list of compulsory appendices for generic quality standard 3.
The study programme may additionally, if this is essential in order to understand (an element of) the study programme correctly, make additional materials available itself (see also 4.2.2 for the self-evaluation update and other additional information or supplementary documents).

**Distinctive quality feature** (optional)

The study programme may, optionally, ask the assessment panel for assessment of distinctive quality features. Prior to the assessment the study programme must inform VLUHR QA that it is requesting assessment of the distinctive quality feature. The assessment of distinctive quality features does not influence the outcome of the accreditation, but it may lead to a note in the accreditation report stating that distinctive quality features are in fact present.

The assessment panel must be selected in a way that is adequate to allow it to assess the distinctive quality feature. In order to achieve this, the study programme should request assessment of a distinctive quality feature before the assessment panel is selected.

Distinctive quality features must meet a number of criteria:

- the feature must make a significant contribution towards differentiation and profiling in higher education;
- the feature must contribute towards the quality of the study programme;
- the consequences of the feature on educational quality must be defined.

For a number of distinctive quality features, specific assessment frameworks have been or are being developed. Study programmes that request assessment of a distinctive quality feature for which a relevant framework exists must follow the elements of that framework when substantiating the criteria for the distinctive quality feature.\(^6\)

**Criterion 1: Differentiation and profiling**

*The distinctive quality feature makes a significant contribution towards differentiation and profiling in higher education.*

Explanation:
The study programme or institution demonstrates that the distinctive quality feature has a decisive but not necessarily unique character in relation to other relevant institutions or higher education study programmes in Flanders.

Opinion:
Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent. (Considered and substantiated)

**Criterion 2: Quality**

*The distinctive quality feature contributes towards the quality of the study programme.*

Explanation:
The distinctive quality feature is not an isolated feature but contributes towards the overall quality of the study programme or institution. This means that the distinctive quality feature must be included in the three generic quality standards and must result in a higher assessment score for each.

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\(^6\) The frameworks can be found on the website of the NVAO (www.nvao.net).
Opinion:
Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent. (Considered and substantiated)

Criterion 3: Operationalisation
The consequences of the distinctive quality feature on educational quality must be defined.

Explanation:
The distinctive quality feature is expressed in a visible and/or measurable way in the various elements of the educational process and the level that is reached.

Opinion:
Unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent. (Considered and substantiated)

General conclusion and decision-making rule
The distinctive quality feature is

Awarded, not awarded. (Considered and substantiated)

Decision-making rule: A distinctive quality feature can only be awarded if there is at least one “excellent” grade and no “unsatisfactory” or “satisfactory” grades at all.
CHAPTER 3  ASSESSMENT PANEL

3.1. CRITERIA FOR SELECTION OF THE PANEL

The external quality assurance process stands or falls by the quality of the panel that will assess the study programme(s). It is important that the assessment panel is established in such a way that a meaningful discussion can result between 'peers' and other experts and with the study programme. A panel must therefore be authoritative, independent and expert.

3.1.1. AUTHORITATIVE

In order to bring about a constructive, substantive discussion between 'peers' and to ensure that the final assessment is supported by the study programme(s), it is important for the panel to be composed of respected specialist colleagues who have acquired sufficient authority within the discipline. In order to guarantee this authoritative status, the study programme(s) and institution(s) to be assessed are actively involved in the panel selection process (see § 3.2). For the same reason, the presence of international experts is compulsory.

3.1.2. INDEPENDENT

Since the assessment process has to be able to take place without influence from any interested party whatsoever, the panel is subject to strict requirements in terms of independence (see Appendix 6.1.). During the selection process, the independence of the individual panel members is explicitly checked and panel members expressly declare their independence by signing a statement of independence before and after completing their duties as a panel member.

3.1.3. EXPERT

The expertise present on the assessment panel must encompass the entire subject area covered by the study programmes in question, must include insight into national and international developments in the discipline, must pay attention to the educational structure of the study programme and must have sufficient insight into the structure of higher education.

The following criteria therefore apply to the selection of the panel:

1. An assessment panel generally consists of four members, at least two of whom are authoritative experts in the discipline, and one a student. In every case there must also be educational expertise present on the panel, in the person of either an educational expert or the experts in the discipline. The panel is assisted by a secretary, who is assigned by VLUHR QA. The secretary is not a member of the panel (see § 3.2.7).

2. The assessment panel as a whole must have the following expertise:
   a) Subject expertise focusing on developments in the discipline. A subject specialist is or has been engaged in providing teaching on an identical or related study programme with the same orientation and contributes to the development of professional practice, the discipline or the subject area;
   b) International expertise is represented on the assessment panel if the panel is capable of comparing the content of the study programme with related study programmes with the same orientation and at the same level in other countries and, if applicable, if the assessment panel has insight into the demands placed on graduates in the international professional context. This last form of international expertise is important in the case of study programmes that have a ‘civil effect’ (i.e. which confer access to specific professions) and is a compulsory element in study programmes that offer preparation for work in an international context;
   c) Professional expertise is essential in the case of study programmes with a professional orientation.
The professional expert has a good overview of the demands that are placed on graduates in the professional context, for example through his involvement in umbrella organizations or through holding a leadership position with a major or distinctive employer;
d) **Educational expertise** refers to recent experiences with delivering or developing teaching at the relevant educational level for the study programme, and expertise in relation to the (types of) teaching provided by the study programme.
e) The term **student-related expertise** is applicable up to one year after graduation (Bachelor's or Master's) at the time when the assessment panel is proposed to the VLUHR QA Board.
f) **Assessment or audit expertise** should preferably be in the area of higher education.

A combination of these types of expertise should be represented on the assessment panel.

3. Every panel member meets the independence requirements (see Appendix 6.1). The panel members sign an independence and confidentiality declaration.
4. Every panel member signs the ethical code of conduct (see Appendix 6.2.).
5. Every panel member has an active knowledge of the language in which the assessment is carried out.

The following additional criteria also apply to the student member:
1. registration on a study programme offered in the Flemish Community, preferably on one of the study programmes to be assessed, a similar study programme in Belgium or abroad or a study programme in the same field of study, at the time when the selection process for the assessment panel begins (i.e. the official request from VLUHR QA to the study programmes and the VVS to propose candidates for the assessment panel). In every case this must be a student who has signed a study contract with the institution;
2. at the time when the assessment panel is set up (preparatory meeting), should have acquired a minimum of 30 credits on a study programme;
3. should preferably have relevant experience of participation bodies, either within a study programme or within an institution.

### 3.1.4. OTHER STIPULATIONS

Exceptions are rarely made concerning the number of panel members. Every request for an increased number must be substantiated. The substantiation, together with an estimate of the additional cost, must be submitted to the Board of the relevant institution by VLUHR QA.

For assessments involving large clusters which can practically be carried out within the completion period of one year stipulated by the Higher Education Act, sub-panels are used. When selecting the sub-panels, attempts are made to ensure an overlap of members between the sub-panels, preferably including the chair. The project manager ensures that the sub-panels monitor the consistency and similar implementation of the assessments.

For assessments of large clusters that cannot practically be carried out within the completion period of one year prescribed by the Higher Education Act, it is necessary to have parallel panels working independently of each other. Attempts are made to organise these assessments within a single period of time wherever possible and to ensure consistency of implementation through consultation between the chair and the project manager.

### 3.2. SELECTION PROCEDURE

To guarantee the authority, independence and expertise of the panel, a procedure has been developed whereby different bodies make an active contribution to the process independently of each other. The study programmes
to be assessed propose candidates, the independent VLUHR QA Board investigates the proposals and either does or does not approve them. Before making a final decision on the composition of the assessment panel, the assessment body submits the proposal to NVAO for an opinion.

3.2.1. PROPOSAL OF CANDIDATES
After the formal announcement of the assessment, each institution involved appoints a contact person at study programme level. The contact persons are asked, after consultation within the study programme, to present candidates in accordance with the criteria and stipulations set out under § 3.1.

The proposal consists of a list of names of possible candidate members and a list of possible candidate chairs. A completed CV form is supplied for each candidate.7. Candidates for whom no CV form is provided are not included in the remainder of the procedure.

Under an agreement between the Flemish Student Association (Dutch: VVS) and VLUHR QA, the VVS proposes the student member for the relevant assessment panels. The proposal contains a list of names of candidate student members (the number depends on the study programme being offered by one or more institutions). The proposal, together with the CVs showing that the proposed student members meet the predefined criteria (see §3.1.3), is submitted to VLUHR QA. The contact persons for the study programmes involved in the assessment can be consulted on the subject of this proposal. On the basis of this consultation it may be decided, provided there are sound reasons, to propose candidate student members other than the candidates proposed by the VVS. For study programmes that have no representation within the VVS or if no candidate student member is proposed by the VVS, the study programmes and/or the VLUHR QA will make a proposal.

3.2.2. PANEL SELECTION MEETING
The VLUHR QA produces a summary of the proposals for candidate chairs and candidate members which are sent to the contact persons for the relevant study programmes and are then discussed at a panel selection meeting together with the contact persons from the study programmes and VLUHR QA. Only the contact person appointed by the institution's board for each institution attends this meeting. If necessary, however (very diverse study programmes within a single assessment cluster), two contact persons for a single institution may exceptionally attend the consultation meeting on selection of the assessment panel for the purpose of substantive discussions on the (expertise of) the candidates.

The purpose of the panel selection meeting is to arrive at:

- a proposal for the chair of the assessment panel, consisting of at least two names in order of preference. The chair(s) is (are) involved in the subsequent process of selecting the assessment panel;
- a list of candidate members who are eligible according to the meeting to be members of the assessment panel, stating any restrictions on their participation in the assessment of (a) specific study programme(s).

VLUHR QA monitors the application of the criteria for selection of the assessment panel. If study programmes fail to propose candidate chairs and/or candidate members, VLUHR QA has the authority to add other candidate chairs and/or members to the proposal made by the contact persons. The study programmes are informed of this where applicable.

When drafting the proposal for the chair of the assessment panel and the list of possible candidate members, a consensus is not required between the contact persons.

3.2.3. APPROVAL OF THE PROPOSAL FOR THE CHAIR AND LIST OF CANDIDATE MEMBERS

7 www.vluhr.be/kwaliteitszorg
The proposal for the chair, consisting of at least two names in order of preference, and the list of candidate members and student members, is then submitted for approval to the VLUHR QA Board, which checks whether the criteria for the selection of the assessment panel were met.

After approval by the VLUHR QA Board, a letter is written to the proposed candidate chair to ask whether he/she is willing to chair the assessment panel. He/she is also asked to sign the statement of independence.

If the first-ranked candidate chair does not accept the position, the next candidate chair is approached. If the list is exhausted, a new proposal for the chair of the assessment panel must be made according to the procedure described above.

3.2.4. FURTHER SELECTION

The approval by the VLUHR QA Board authorises the chair to work out a proposal for the further selection of the assessment panel, in consultation with the VLUHR QA, using the approved list of candidate members and student members. The chair of the assessment panel may propose additional candidate members and candidate student members. If applicable the study programmes are informed of this.

The proposal for further selection of the panel consists of at least two or three separate lists (one or two for the candidate members and one for the student members) in which a single actual candidate is indicated in each case, and possible reserve candidates are ranked in order of preference.

3.2.5. APPROVAL OF PROPOSAL FOR FURTHER SELECTION

The proposal for further selection is submitted for approval to the VLUHR QA Board, which checks whether the criteria for selection of the assessment panel were complied with.

After approval by the VLUHR QA Board, a letter is written to the proposed candidate members to ask whether they are willing to sit on the assessment panel. They are also asked to sign the statement of independence. If an actual candidate member does not accept the position, the reserve candidates are approached in order of preference. If the list of candidate members is exhausted, the study programmes are consulted again. The selection of the assessment panel is then submitted to NVAO for an opinion.

3.2.6. PREPARATORY OF THE ASSESSMENT PANEL

As a final step, the assessment panel is inaugurated by a resolution of the VLUHR QA Board. The preparatory decision is submitted to:

- chair and members of the assessment panel
- vice-chancellors and/or general directors of the relevant institutions
- deans and/or heads of department
- contact persons for the institutions involved
- contact persons for the study programmes involved

3.2.7. PROJECT MANAGER / SECRETARY OF THE PANEL

The panel is supported throughout the process by a project manager who is responsible for preparing the content and practical aspects as well as the implementation of assessments, and for providing information about the assessment system to the study programmes and assessment panels. The role of project manager is always carried out by a member of staff from the VLUHR QA team.

For each on-site visit a secretary is also appointed by VLUHR QA, who is responsible for preparing for and taking minutes during the meeting, and also for drafting and editing the study programme report. The role of secretary is generally carried out by the project manager. For organizational reasons (for example in the case of large clusters) it is possible to deviate from this rule and make use of (a) different member(s) of staff from the VLUHR QA team. The secretary is not a member of the assessment panel. After the assessment process has been
completed, the secretary signs a declaration confirming that the report has been produced completely independently.

3.3. MISSION OF THE ASSESSMENT PANEL

The assessment panel is expected, on the basis of the self-evaluation by the study programme and through interviews carried out on location:

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

Where applicable, and when explicitly requested by a study programme, the assessment panel carries out an assessment of distinctive quality features. The assessment of distinctive quality features does not influence the accreditation decision.

Appendix 6.2. contains an ethical code and specific expectations of panel members.

3.3.1. OPINIONS

The assessment panel assesses the study programme according to the three or four generic quality standards set out in the assessment framework (see § 2.3).

For each generic quality standard the panel expresses a considered and substantiated opinion, according to a four-point scale: satisfactory, good, excellent or unsatisfactory. The opinions are supported by facts and analyses as far as possible and make use of illustrative examples where possible. The panel must make it clear how it has reached its opinion, taking into account the (criteria of the) generic quality standards. In doing this the panel takes into account the follow-up of the recommendations of the previous assessment panel and the study programme's future plans. The panel also expresses a final opinion on the quality of the study programme as a whole, also according to a four-point scale: satisfactory, good, excellent or unsatisfactory.

The definitions set out below are used when assessing the generic quality standards.

**Generic quality**

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

**Satisfactory**

> The study programme meets the generic quality standards because it demonstrates an acceptable level for the generic quality standard.

**Good**

> The study programme systematically exceeds the generic quality standards for the generic quality standard.

**Excellent**

> The study programme achieves well above the generic quality standards for the generic quality standard and serves as an (inter)national example in this regard.
Unsatisfactory
The generic quality standard is unsatisfactory.

The rules set out below are applicable to the final opinion.

Satisfactory
The final opinion on a study programme is ‘satisfactory’ if the study programme meets all generic quality standards.

Good
The final opinion on a study programme is ‘good’ if at least two generic quality standards are additionally assessed as ‘good’, including in every case the third one: final outcomes achieved.

Excellent
The final opinion on a study programme is ‘excellent’ if at least two generic quality standards are additionally assessed as ‘excellent’, including in every case the third one: final outcomes achieved.

Unsatisfactory
The final opinion on a study programme - or a mode of study - is ‘unsatisfactory’ if all generic quality standards are assessed as ‘unsatisfactory’.

Satisfactory for a limited period
The final opinion on a study programme - or a mode of study - is ‘satisfactory for a limited period’, i.e. shorter than the accreditation period, if, on a first assessment, one or two generic quality standards are assessed as ‘unsatisfactory’.

These opinions are also applicable to the final opinion on study programmes offered by non-statutory registered institutions. The opinion on the fourth generic quality standard is not included under these rules, but it must be at least ‘satisfactory’.

At the end of the assessment, each panel member uses the assessment form8 to express his or her opinions on a study programme. The panel as a whole then confirms these opinions. If a consensus is not reached, the chair of the panel makes the final decision.

3.3.2. RECOMMENDATIONS
As well as stating opinions, the panel is also expected to issue constructive recommendations on making quality improvements where possible. In doing this the panel must take into account the context of the study programme and the feasibility of the recommendations. Recommendations are formulated in the most concrete way possible and summarised in a separate list at the end of each study programme report (see § 4.3.1.).

3.3.3. COMPARABILITY
If a panel is assessing a cluster of different study programmes within a particular discipline, it must also represent its findings in a comparative format. For each standard, on the basis of the final study programme reports, generic findings and recommendations are identified and good practices are highlighted if applicable. This comparison must

8 See www.vluhr.be/kwaliteitszorg
• make it clear which are the elements on the basis of which the scores were allocated to the various study programmes involved,
• to enable the study programmes to learn from each other by highlighting good practices,
• to provide a broader overview of the quality of education achieved within a given discipline.

The comparison is included as a separate chapter in the assessment report.

For on-site visits to large clusters that cannot practically be carried out within the one-year completion period prescribed by the Higher Education Act and where it is necessary to work with parallel panels, each individual panel expresses its findings on a comparative basis. After consultation with the panels in question and the Quality Assurance Unit, it may be decided, subsequent to the publication of the separate reports, to publish a supplementary comparative analysis of the findings of the various parallel panels.

3.3.4. INFORMATION
The panel informs society at large of its findings by issuing a public assessment report.
CHAPTER 4 ASSESSMENT PROCESS

After a preparatory phase in which the study programmes involved produce their self-evaluation report (see chapter 2) and the assessment panel is selected (see chapter 3), the preparatory meeting is held for the panel and the on-site visits take place. The assessment process ends with the publication of an assessment report.

4.1. PREPARATORY MEETING

At the preparatory meeting, which precedes the on-site visits by the panel to the study programmes to be assessed, the assessment panel is formally inaugurated. The meeting serves as the first opportunity for the panel members to get to know each other, to receive further explanations about the assessment process and to prepare for the activities. Specifically, attention is paid to the uniform implementation of the accreditation framework and the assessment protocol. This can be done inter alia by means of a training course.

Preferably one month before this meeting, VLUHR QA submits the self-evaluation reports for the study programmes involved to the panel members and they are asked to make a choice from the final projects listed in the summary (see compulsory appendices to chapter 3, § 2.3.). The selected dissertations are requested from the study programme by VLUHR QA and they are made available to the panel members, if possible before the preparatory meeting but certainly before the first on-site visit.

The panel members are also sent a preparatory information pack prior to the preparatory meeting, containing at least the agenda for the meeting, the information note ‘Structure of Higher Education in Flanders’, the assessment form and the draft visit schedules.

4.1.1. PROVIDING INFORMATION TO THE ASSESSMENT PANEL

At the preparatory meeting, the panel members are given more detailed explanations on the assessment and accreditation system and the practical details of how the assessment process takes place. At this time they are also instructed on the approach to be followed and the working method. Furthermore, building on the document ‘Structure of Higher Education in Flanders’, the members are given further information about the educational, legal and financial context within which Flemish higher education institutions have to operate.

4.1.2. PREPARATION FOR THE ON-SITE VISITS

At the preparatory meeting, the draft visit schedules are discussed and practical arrangements are made for the possible allocation of tasks within the assessment panel.

The panel also goes through the assessment form, which expresses the assessment framework in operational terms and contains the generic quality standards on which the panel has to form an opinion. It is explained that the assessment form is an internal, confidential document, in which the panel has to make explicit its opinions on the various generic quality standards and which will serve as a basis when writing the assessment report.

If possible a first substantive discussion also takes place during the preparatory meeting in relation to the self-evaluation reports and the final dissertations. The intention is to formulate specific questions and points for attention within the panel, which will then be addressed during the on-site visits.
4.2. ON-SITE VISIT

4.2.1. DURATION AND LOCATION
The on-site visit to a study programme in principle takes one day, preceded by a preparatory internal consultation process within the panel. For two consecutive study programmes (for example Bachelor’s and Master’s) a total of two days are scheduled. In the case of an on-site visit involving more than two study programmes, an attempt is made, by clustering interviews, to keep the duration of the visit to a minimum.

In the case of joint programmes organised between Flemish higher education institutions, the assessment panel visits the coordinating institution. The various partner institutions make information available and take part in the discussions with the assessment panel to permit the assessment panel to form the fullest possible view.

In the case of joint programmes organised by a Flemish higher education institution together with one or more higher education institutions outside the Flemish Community, which lead to a joint qualification upon completion, the assessment panel visits the Flemish institution. The partner institutions make information available and take part in the interviews with the assessment panel to permit the assessment panel to form the fullest possible picture. In exceptional cases the assessment panel may consider whether an on-site visit to one or more partner institutions is necessary in the context of drawing up the assessment report. The assessment panel may decide to do this if it is the only way of gaining an adequate view of the study programme involved. It will make its decision in consultation with the Flemish institution involved.

4.2.2. VISIT SCHEDULE
The schedules for the on-site visits should preferably be made available to the study programmes involved at least one month prior to the visit. At a preparatory discussion with the study programme, the visit schedule is explained and practical arrangements are agreed for the on-site visit. If, for any reason, further amendments to the visit schedule are proposed, these must be approved by the chair. The list of interview participants and the practical information are sent to the project manager by the study programmes at least one week before the on-site visit.

A visit schedule contains the following parts:

- Internal discussions
  Every on-site visit is preceded by an internal discussion by the assessment panel, at which the assessment panel prepares for the visit to the study programme involved. The self-evaluation (a possible update - see below) and the materials made available are discussed in more detail and preparations are made for the interviews.

The study programme must submit the following documents for perusal during the on-site visit:
- minutes of discussions in relevant panels/bodies;
- representative selection of manuals / study materials;
- indications of staff competences depending on the type of study programme (for academic study programmes, a selection of publications; for professional and artistic study programmes, based on agreements made during the information meeting);
- the testing and assessment assignments which the panel has indicated that it wishes to review during the on-site visit (in addition to the statements that were studied beforehand);
- the dissertations not selected by the panel from the list of compulsory appendices for generic quality standard 3.

In addition, if essential in order to understand (an element of) the study programme correctly, it may make further material available itself.
If important developments have occurred between the time when the self-evaluation report is submitted and the on-site visit, the study programme may provide updated information to the assessment panel. This update is limited to a maximum of five A4 sheets and it must be made available to the assessment panel before the on-site visit begins.

Other additional information or supplementary documents can only be included in the assessment process after an explicit request from the panel. The panel must ensure that it only requests additional information or documents if it considers these to be essential for the purpose of assessing one of the generic quality standards. If applicable, the panel should give arguments for its request to the study programme verbally (or, if it makes the request prior to the on-site visit, in writing) via the project manager of the VLUHR QA Team.

- **Interviews**
  During the on-site visit the panel interviews all those directly involved in the study programme, with the aim of gaining a view of the quality of the study programme. It always speaks to those responsible for the study programme and to students, lecturers and alumni, as well as to the professional field where relevant. The delegations in principle comprise between six and a maximum of twelve individuals. The student delegation is selected by the student representatives on the study programme itself as far as possible.

- **Informal meeting**
  After discussions between the study programme and VLUHR QA, an informal meeting may be organised during the on-site visit. The purpose of this is to allow the assessment panel to familiarise itself with the various groups involved in an informal setting.

- **On-site visits to facilities used by the study programme.**
  Part of the schedule is set aside for reviewing the programme-specific infrastructure: the stock of books and journals relevant to the study programme, computer areas, laboratories and workshops/studios. During this part of the timetable there may also be opportunity for brief presentations, for example of the programme-specific use of the electronic learning environment or of innovative educational applications.

- **Consultation and additional interviews at the invitation of the assessment panel**
  A consultation is held to give students and members of staff the opportunity to speak to the panel individually or in groups should they wish. The panel may itself also invite individuals to the consultation. The study programme is asked to publicise the consultation widely so that everyone within the study programme is aware of it. Registrations for the consultation are made directly with the project manager / secretary of the assessment panel during the visit.

- **Preparation for verbal reporting**
  After the final interview, the panel withdraws to prepare the verbal reporting. On the basis of the generic quality standards and criteria, the panel assesses the study programme, taking into account the stipulations under § 3.3.1. Every panel member first individually completes the assessment form that he/she received at the beginning of each on-site visit from the project manager / secretary. Afterwards the panel jointly confirms its arguments and opinions. The panel members are expected to submit the completed individual assessment form to the project manager / secretary of the panel at the end of the on-site visit.

- **Verbal reporting**
  The on-site visit by the panel is concluded with a verbal reporting session in which the panel sets out its initial provisional conclusions and recommendations without indicating the scores. During this reporting session the chair will expressly emphasise that these are provisional conclusions, which may be adjusted, for example, following the on-site visits to other study programmes. No discussion is possible with the panel immediately after the verbal reporting session. At least all the interviewees who were involved are invited to the verbal reporting session.
4.2.3. INFORMATION CUTOFF

Additional information or documents provided to the assessment panel after the on-site visit can no longer be taken into account in the assessment, unless the panel has explicitly requested additional information during the visit. If appropriate the panel must state arguments for its request and the information requested must reach the project manager within five working days after the on-site visit.

4.2.4. WITHDRAWAL FROM THE ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE

Study programmes are given the opportunity to withdraw from the assessment procedure during the assessment process, under the following conditions:

- if a study programme is being discontinued and the study programme is being removed from the Higher Education Register;
- notice that the study programme wishes to withdraw must be given to the VLUHR QA Board no later than 14 days after the on-site visit by the assessment panel;
- the formal decision by the institution, confirming that the study programme is being discontinued must be submitted to the VLUHR QA Board no later than one month after the visit by the assessment panel;
- the entire cost of the assessment is borne by the study programme/institution.

4.3. REPORTING

4.3.1. EDITING OF DRAFT STUDY PROGRAMME REPORT

After all the on-site visits are completed, the project manager/secretary of the panel, working on the basis of the self-evaluations and the completed assessment forms, the notes from the interviews that the panel has conducted during its visits, the internal consultations, the verbal reporting process and any additional information requested for clarification during the on-site visit, writes the draft study programme reports, which consist of a maximum of 20 pages and a maximum of 8,000 words, excluding appendices.

For each generic quality standard the study programme report contains the fact-based findings of the assessment panel, its considerations, opinions and suggestions for improvement. The supporting facts for the opinions must make it clear on the basis of which elements and considerations the panel has reached its opinions and should use illustrative examples where possible. Recommendations are formulated in the most concrete terms possible and summarised in a separate list at the end of each study programme report (see § 3.3.2.). The report ends with a table setting out the scores for the generic quality standards. The assessment report offers the following information and key figures in all cases:

1. list of programme-specific learning outcomes related to the validated discipline-specific learning outcomes drafted according to the VLUHR manual, if available, and/or related to the Flemish Qualification Structure;
2. schematic overview of the curriculum, stating the number of credits available for each part of the study programme;
3. staff numbers, measured in FTEs, divided by category of post;
4. intake data, student progression data and total student numbers;
5. the length of study until receiving the qualification for each intake cohort and the average study duration for each graduating cohort;
6. summary of the most important activities of the study programme in relation to internationalisation, in accordance with the vision of the study programme, with as a minimum mobility on the basis of internationally accepted definitions (max. 2 pages).
If there are different modes of study connected to the study programme, the report should make it clear whether each mode of study meets the generic quality standards. Consecutive study programmes within an institution (for example Bachelor's and Master's) may be covered by a single study programme report.

The draft study programme reports are presented to the panel members and discussed and confirmed at a first editorial meeting.

4.3.2. First Feedback Round
After approval by the panel and no later than six months after the last on-site visit, the draft study programme reports are sent under embargo to the study programmes and institutions involved for feedback. Each study programme/institution receives only its own draft study programme report. The study programmes/institutions are asked in all cases to correct factual mistakes in the draft study programme report. Comments on the content may also be submitted to the assessment panel. The responses from the study programmes are submitted to the (project manager of the) assessment panel with the consent of the institution's board, a maximum of three weeks after receipt of the draft study programme report.

4.3.3. Editing of Final Study Programme Report and Comparative Chapter
At a second editorial meeting, the assessment panel discusses the responses from the study programmes/institutions on the draft study programme reports, after which it definitively confirms the study programme report. At this time the panel also drafts written notes in which it indicates how it addressed the comments made by the study programme/institution. The panel is autonomous in its decision on whether or not to take the comments from the study programme/institution into account. Factual mistakes are altered in all cases.

At the second editorial meeting the panel also discusses and finalises the comparative chapter. In it, based on the final study programme reports, general findings and recommendations are identified in relation to each generic quality standard and good practices are highlighted if applicable. The comparative chapter ends with a table showing a summary of the scores that were given.

4.3.4. Second Feedback Round
After approval by the panel the comparative chapter, the study programme reports, amended if applicable, and the notes indicating how the panel dealt with the comments from the study programme/institution, are sent under embargo to the study programmes and institutions involved.
If a study programme/institution is not satisfied with the way in which the panel took the comments into account, and if the study programme/institution considers it necessary, a response from the institution which must be submitted within three weeks may be included as an appendix to the final report. All the responses are gathered into a file within VLUHR QA.
If a study programme/institution considers it necessary to respond to the content of the comparative chapter, it may submit its comments to the assessment panel within one week after the second feedback is sent.

At the time of the second feedback round, the study programme/institution may also file an appeal against the study programme report. To that end it may file a complaint in accordance with the regulations for the internal assessment report appeals procedure which is enclosed as Appendix 6.3. If the internal appeals procedure is used, this will be stated in the assessment report.

The draft texts will be under embargo until final publication of the assessment report. This does not mean that the institution/study programme cannot adapt its policy in accordance with any recommendations from the

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9 This period may be extended if the feedback period falls within a holiday period
10 This period may be extended if the feedback period falls within a holiday period
assessment panel before the process is completed. The institutions/study programmes are requested, however, pending publication, not to cite the report in published documents or to publish parts of it or of the draft report in their entirety.

4.3.5. FORMAL SUBMISSION AND PUBLICATION OF THE FINAL REPORT
As a final step in the assessment process, the final report is prepared for press and then published. The final report from the panel which is published contains a foreword from the chair of the panel, a general section, the study programme reports and a number of compulsory appendices. The assessment report also contains a summary accessible to the general public (maximum of 2 pages) for each study programme report.

The general part of the assessment report comprises:
- an introductory chapter including:
  - a summary of the study programmes involved;
  - the selection of the assessment panel;
  - a brief description of the working method of the assessment panel;
- the comparative chapter containing the comparative score table.

The following appendices must be included in the assessment report:
- curricula vitae of the panel members;
- the visit schedules.

The report is formally submitted to the VLUHR QA Board.

The assessment report, which is clearly dated, is placed on the website of the VLUHR QA so as to make it accessible to the public. The publication date serves as a reference date for the subsequent accreditation request.

4.4. FOLLOW-UP

What is ultimately done with the results of assessments is primarily a matter for the institutions themselves. It is the responsibility of the institutions to take action on the basis of the findings and recommendations of assessment panels. The institutions themselves also take the initiative in regard to the accreditation request (see chapter 5).

In the context of the improvement function, quality assurance is clearly a continuous process which does not end upon publication of the assessment report. The reporting by the panels is specifically intended to support the quality assurance process by setting out practical recommendations in relation to individual study programmes or making recommendations that are cross-institutional in nature and demand a collective approach to problems that have been identified. The assessment panels will also pay explicit attention to the follow-up of the findings and recommendations of the previous assessment panel.

Both internal and external reporting must take place on how the assessments are followed up. As regards internal reporting, there is a system in place in most institutions. External reporting is done via annual reports to the government, in which the institutions indicate what they have done or will do with the results of the assessments. In the context of the accountability function, it must be made clear to outsiders that the system is also giving rise to some action. This is done partly through publication of the assessment report and partly through accreditation and publication of the accreditation decision.
CHAPTER 5  ACCREDITATION PROCESS

5.1. ACCREDITATION REQUEST

No later than four months after expiry of the validity period of the current accreditation and no later than two months after publication of the assessment report, the institution’s board must submit a request for accreditation to the Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO). For study programmes that are organised jointly by multiple institutions and result in a joint qualification, the Flemish institutional boards involved must submit a joint request.

The assessment report forms part of the accreditation request. The self-evaluation report does not form part of the request for assessment submitted to NVAO.

A separate accreditation must be requested for every Bachelor’s or Master’s programme. The assessment panel includes a substantiated final opinion on the generic quality of each study programme involved in the assessment report. The assessment panel indicates whether sufficient generic quality standards are in place within the study programme. If there are different modes of study, the assessment report also contains a substantiated opinion on the generic quality of that mode of study. In such cases all modes of study that existed and were assessed at the time of the assessment must be included in the accreditation request.

If the final opinion of an assessment panel on a study programme or on one of several modes of study - is ‘satisfactory for a limited period’ then an improvement plan must be appended to the accreditation request. The improvement plan concerns the generic quality standards which have been assessed as unsatisfactory for the relevant study programme (cq. modes of study).

5.2. ASSESSMENT PROCESS AND DECISION-MAKING

5.2.1 REQUEST HANDLING

When handling the accreditation request, NVAO checks whether the assessment report submitted by the institution is in order, of a high standard and sufficiently complete to allow a properly substantiated accreditation decision to be made without reasonable doubt.

If NVAO considers it necessary, it may ask the assessment body or, if applicable, the institution’s board for additional information, explanations and clarifications. This takes place after submission of the accreditation request and before the draft decision is sent to the institution. If NVAO makes use of the opportunity to consult one of the aforementioned parties involved, this is mentioned in the assessment report.

5.2.2. DECISION-MAKING

NVAO makes an accreditation decision within three months of receiving the accreditation request. If NVAO has not made an accreditation decision within this period, the validity period of the current accreditation will be extended to the end of the academic year in which the accreditation decision is finally taken.

Accreditation may also be granted on the basis of a foreign accreditation which NVAO recognises as equivalent.

After the accreditation decision is finally confirmed, NVAO sends it to the institution’s board without delay. At the same time it publishes the accreditation decision by placing it on the website of NVAO.

NVAO may make four possible decisions:
Possibility 1 - Rejection of the assessment report
The assessment report is rejected if NVAO does not feel able, on the basis of the assessment report and supplementary information, to give an adequately substantiated decision on the accreditation of a study programme or modes of study connected to the study programme. The period of the current accreditation is extended by a maximum of one year. Within this period the institution's board must have an additional external assessment carried out by the same assessment body or by a different one. The institution's board must submit a new accreditation request within three months before expiry of the extended accreditation period. NVAO then takes a decision within a period of two months.

Possibility 2 - Accreditation of the study programme
The study programme is accredited if NVAO, on the basis of the assessment report, is reasonably able to decide that the quality of the study programme provides all the generic quality standards set out in the accreditation framework. In the case of a study programme with different modes of study, a positive accreditation decision requires the assessment to show that each mode of study is satisfactory. In the case of a positive decision, the study programme is accredited for eight years.

Possibility 3 - Provisional accreditation of the study programme
The study programme is accredited for a limited period if NVAO, on the basis of the assessment report, decides that the study programme or a mode of study does not provide all the generic quality standards set out in the accreditation framework. The period of accreditation is limited to no more than three years. Within the limited period the institution's board may commission a new, external assessment of the generic quality standards which were assessed as being unsatisfactory. On the basis of this assessment, NVAO will take a new accreditation decision which may be positive or negative.

If the accreditation period is limited because one or modes of study connected to the study programme fail(s) to provide all the generic quality standards, the institution's board may also decide to withdraw the mode(s) of study in question. No more students can then be registered from the next academic year. The study programme’s mode of study cannot be restarted for six years.

Possibility 4 - Non-accreditation of the study programme
NVAO makes a negative accreditation decision if, on the basis of the assessment report and any supplementary information, notes and clarifications, it has reached the decision on the basis of an initial assessment that the study programme (or modes of study) do not provide any of the generic quality standards. NVAO also makes a negative accreditation decision if, after an additional limited assessment, the study programme does not provide all the generic quality standards.

In the event of a negative accreditation decision, the study programme loses the right to receive funding and loses the right to award Bachelor's or Master's degrees. The study programme is deleted from the Higher Education Register.

The institution's board is entitled to submit an appeal to the Flemish Government against the negative accreditation decision.
CHAPTER 6     APPENDICES

Appendix 6.1.  Independence requirements for assessment panels
Appendix 6.2.  Ethical code and code of conduct for members of the assessment panel
Appendix 6.3.  Regulations for the internal assessment report appeals procedure
APPENDIX 6.1.

INDEPENDENCE REQUIREMENTS FOR ASSESSMENT PANELS

The following cannot be appointed as chair or member of the assessment panel:

1° Individuals who, at the time of selection of the assessment panel or during a period of five years prior to this, are or have been a member of staff at the institution/one of the institutions to be assessed.
   A member of staff of an institution is defined as:
   - Individuals who are employed in the institution on a tenured, untenured basis or on the basis of a contract of employment;
   - Other academic staff and grant recipients working within the institution, regardless of the nature of the employment or the origin of their remuneration;

2° Individuals who, at the time of selection of the assessment panel or during a period of five years prior to this, were members of a central governing body of the institution providing the study programme or one of the study programmes to be assessed, of the hospital associated with the institution in question or of the association to which the institution belongs;

3° Individuals who, at the time of selection of the assessment panel or during a period of five years prior to this, without being members of staff of the institution providing the study programme or one of the study programmes to be assessed, is providing or has provided advice or is carrying out or has carried out assignments for the institution or is regularly involved or has been regularly involved in organising or assessing courses for the study programme / one of the study programmes to be assessed;

4° Individuals who, at the time of selection of the assessment panel, are married to or cohabiting with a person in one of the categories referred to under 1°, 2° and 3°, and blood relatives up to the second degree of kinship of the persons referred to under 1°, 2° and 3°.

With the exception of the chair of the assessment panel, exceptions to the aforementioned disqualifications may be made if this is considered to be justified due to the difficulty of otherwise selecting an assessment panel that adequately meets the requirements of expertise, independence and authority. In such cases the reasons for making the exception are stated in the proposal and in the appointment decision. It is also stated what limitations, if applicable, are imposed on participation by the member in question in the activities of the panel. An exception from the aforementioned disqualifications is not granted for 1° individuals who, at the time of selection of the assessment panel or during a period of five years prior to this, are or have been a member of staff at the institution/one of the institutions to be assessed.
APPENDIX 6.2.

ETHICAL CODE AND CODE OF CONDUCT FOR MEMBERS OF THE ASSESSMENT PANEL

1. A panel member respects the mission of the institution and the study programme to be assessed. A panel member is aware of his or her role and carries out that role with the greatest respect for all his or her discussion partners.

2. A panel member must not be guided or influenced in the formation of his/her opinion by persons or parties involved with the institution or the study programme to be assessed, or by other interested parties. A panel member speaks on the basis of his or her own expertise and on his or her own behalf and does not represent the opinion of any organization of which the panel member may be a member.

3. A panel member must, when assessing quality, be able to distance himself or herself sufficiently from personal ideas, convictions or preferences in relation to the field or discipline being assessed.

4. A panel member must form his/her opinion in accordance with the VLUHR assessment protocol which is based on the Accreditation Framework established by NVAO for existing higher education study programmes in Flanders. When a panel has to assess multiple study programmes, these frameworks and the assessment criteria comprised within them shall be applied in a uniform way to all the study programmes.

5. A panel member bases his or her opinion on the following information:
   - the self-evaluation report produced by the study programme together with the associated appendices and documentation;
   - any additional information provided at the request of the panel;
   - the interviews conducted in the context of the on-site visit;
   - the observations made during on-site visits;
   - the discipline-specific framework of learning outcomes defined by the study programmes;
   - research carried out by the panel using other public information (e.g. websites).

6. The assessment by a panel member must satisfy the following quality requirements:
   - expertise and professionalism;
   - independence and objectivity;
   - due care and consistency;
   - transparency and freedom from prejudice/impartiality.

7. A panel member does not use information gathered in the context of the assessment and evaluation process for personal or professional purposes. All information is treated as confidential.

8. A panel member does not accept any gifts or rewards from a study programme to be assessed or from an institution involved in the assessment.

9. A panel member has no financial or commercial interests in the study programme, the institution or the hospital associated with the institution which is to be assessed, nor in the association to which the institution belongs.

10. A panel member is aware of the complexity of planning the timetable for the assessment process and the on-site visits and for the various players involved and will therefore, except in cases of force...
majeure, make every effort to keep to all commitments that are made in terms of timing, attendance, duties as a panel member etc.
APPENDIX 6.3.

REGULATIONS FOR THE INTERNAL ASSESSMENT REPORT APPEALS PROCEDURE

ARTICLE 1.

An internal appeals committee for external review reports shall be set up within VLUHR, referred to hereinafter as the ‘appeals committee’.

The appeals committee shall rule on the appeals filed by institutions against study programme reports after the second feedback round.

ARTICLE 2. COMPOSITION

The appeals committee shall consist of

- an acting chair and a deputy chair;
- two acting assessors and two deputy assessors.

They shall be appointed by the VLUHR QA Board on a proposal from the VLUHR QA, for a renewable period of 3 years.

The chair shall have expertise in educational and/or administrative law. The assessors shall have expertise in educational assessment.

The VLUHR QA Board shall appoint a permanent secretary and a deputy.

ARTICLE 3. POWERS

The appeals committee shall rule on the admissibility of appeals.

It shall judge whether the appeal is well founded on the basis of

1° the implementation within a specific external review of the relevant legislative and regulatory stipulations and the procedures described in the current ‘VLUHR Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education’;
2° the general administrative principles.

The appeals committee shall not comment on the quality of the externally reviewed study programmes.

ARTICLE 4. FILING AND REGISTERING THE APPEAL

§ 1. The board of an institution which does not agree with a score of ‘unsatisfactory’ on one of the generic quality assurances in a study programme report after the second feedback round, may file an appeal against it to the appeals committee within a deadline of fifteen calendar days from the day after receipt of the study programme report, second feedback, sent electronically or by post. The statement of appeal shall be sent by registered letter or delivered by hand with acknowledgement of receipt, to the secretariat of the appeals committee. The date of posting or the date shown on the acknowledgement of receipt shall count as the date of the statement of appeal.
§ 2. The statement of appeal shall include the following details:
1° the name, address, telephone number of the institution's board;
2° the date and signature of the Chief Executive or Principal;
3° the title of the study programme report after the second feedback round to which the statement of appeal relates;
4° at least a factual description of the objections that are made.

The institution's board shall enclose with the statement of appeal the supporting documentation which it considers necessary. The institution's board shall gather the documents together and provide a document list.

§ 3. Each statement of appeal shall be entered in a register by the secretariat of the appeals committee. A copy of the statement of appeal shall be submitted to the members of the internal appeals committee and to the chair of the review panel concerned.

ARTICLE 5. ASSESSMENT AND NOTIFICATION OF ADMISSIBILITY

§ 1. The appeal shall not be admissible if the institution's board has not, after the first feedback round, made use of the opportunity to submit its objections to the review panel in accordance with 4.3.4., para 3 of the Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education.

The statement of appeal shall be admissible if it
1° has been submitted within the stated period; and
2° includes, as a minimum, the information referred to in article 4, § 2 of these regulations.

§ 2. The secretariat of the appeals committee shall investigate the admissibility of the appeal and submit its findings to the appeals committee.

If the appeals committee finds a statement of appeal to be inadmissible, it shall inform the institution's board of this by registered letter or by hand with acknowledgment of receipt, within a deadline of 15 calendar days starting on the day after receipt of the statement of appeal. The appeals procedure will thereby be terminated.

§ 3. The institution's board may, during the period for submission of the appeal as stipulated in article 4 §1, submit a new statement of appeal which expressly withdraws the earlier statement of appeal.

§ 4. If a statement of appeal is admissible, the appeals committee shall inform the institution's board and the chair of the review panel in question of this without delay and shall instigate an investigation into the grounds for the appeal.

ARTICLE 6. INVESTIGATION OF THE GROUNDS

The appeals committee may request additional information, indicating the deadline by which the information must be submitted.

It may call the parties to attend a joint consultation, the venue and time for which it shall determine. The review panel shall be represented by its chair and/or by the members delegated by the review panel.
ARTICLE 7. DECISION

§ 1. The appeals committee shall inform the institution's board and the chair of the review panel in question of its decision, stating reasons, by registered letter or by hand with acknowledgement of receipt, within a deadline of 20 calendar days beginning on the day after the statement of appeal was received.

§ 2. The appeals committee may
1° decide that the appeal is unfounded; the study programme report will remain unchanged;
2° decide that the review panel must take into consideration certain changes in the study programme report, for example providing clearer justification for a judgement;
3° decide that certain parts of the external review must be repeated, in accordance with the stipulations and general principles set out in article three of these regulations. The appeals committee may require a return visit for this purpose. The return visit shall generally be carried out by the chair of the review panel and at least 2 members of the review panel, assisted by a staff member from the VLUHR QA. The appeals committee may decide that the return visit is to be carried out by a newly constituted panel.

§ 3. The review panel shall set down the result of its new external review and discussions, resulting from the decision of the appeals committee as stated in art. 7 §2. 2° and 3°, in a report which will, if applicable, result in an amended study programme report after the second feedback round. The assessment panel shall submit the report and the study programme report after the second feedback round, with amendments if applicable, to the VLUHR QA, which shall carry out the subsequent follow-up.

ARTICLE 8. COSTS

For an appeal submitted to the internal appeals committee as stipulated in article 2, a non-refundable administrative charge of 700 euros per statement of appeal will be made to the institution's board.

ARTICLE 9. INTERNAL REGULATIONS

The appeals committee shall draft internal regulations.

ARTICLE 10. END OF A DEADLINE PERIOD

If the last day of a deadline period falls on a Saturday, Sunday or public holiday, the period shall be extended until the next working day when post offices are open.

ARTICLE 11.

These regulations shall come into force on 20 September 2013.