

# Self-evaluation report

2014

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

[www.vluhr.be/kwaliteitszorg](http://www.vluhr.be/kwaliteitszorg) Brussels, 31th March 2014

vluhr

**VLUHR QA - SELF-EVALUATION REPORT 2014**

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## PREFACE

This self-evaluation report sets out the information and evidence that demonstrates how VLUHR Quality Assurance ('Vlaamse Universiteiten en Hogescholen Raad Kwaliteitszorg') complies with the ENQA membership criteria as well as with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG). It is the result of a self-evaluation process carried out by VLUHR Quality Assurance (VLUHR QA) in preparation for its peer review for the reconfirmation of the agency's full membership of the European Association for QA in Higher Education (ENQA).

VLUHR QA is operational since 1st January 2013. It is the outcome of an integration process of the former quality assurance units of VLHORA (Flemish Council of University Colleges) and VLIR (Flemish Interuniversity Council). VLUHR QA is not merely the legal successor of these quality assurance units, it also inherited similar working methods. An important objective behind the establishment of VLUHR QA was to better guarantee the operational independence of the quality assurance agency from the Flemish higher education institutions, which was an important recommendation of the previous peer reviews of VLIR and VLHORA.

Following positive peer review reports for the former quality assurance units of VLHORA and VLIR in respectively 2008 and 2009, both units continued to be full members of ENQA and were registered in EQAR. Considering the similar *modus operandi*, the Board of ENQA agreed to transfer the full membership status of the former units to VLUHR QA in April 2013. Being a newly established agency, VLUHR QA has to prove its compliance with the membership criteria *cq.* ESG within two years of its amalgamation. VLUHR QA consequently requested a type A review with ENQA in order to have a final assessment report published in April 2015. This review will test the compliance of the agency with the membership criteria *cq.* ESG. The final report of this review will be used to re-apply for a full membership of ENQA and a registration in EQAR. As the provisional EQAR registration of VLUHR QA only lasts until December 2014, the peer review report should be published before this time.

In the preparation of this self-evaluation report, VLUHR QA tried to gather as many perspectives on its working methods as possible. On the one hand, an in-house perspective of the VLUHR QA management and staff fuelled the organizational self-analysis, on the other hand external points of view that resulted from bilateral contacts with the Government, the Accreditation Organization for the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), higher education institution and study programme representatives, peer review panel members and student representatives added to a self-critical attitude. The outcome of the preparatory steps by VLUHR QA served a two-fold purpose, as the self-analysis also provided a framework for the further integration of the VLIR and VLHORA quality assurance units into VLUHR QA.

Following the 2008 and 2009 peer reviews of the VLIR and VLHORA quality assurance units, VLUHR QA has paid attention to the earlier recommendations. The agency is stepping up its efforts in increasing its autonomy, in finding a balance between that autonomy and ownership by the Flemish higher education institutions and in providing more accessible information for all stakeholders (including society at large). VLUHR QA believes it has made significant progress with regard to these and other points of recommendation made by previous peer review panels of the VLIR and VLHORA quality assurance units.

The self-evaluation process in general proved to be an interesting exercise, yielding new ideas and perspectives for the improvement of VLUHR QA's working methods. Looking into the future, VLUHR QA wants to continue its contribution to the quality culture in higher education in Flanders.

It does so through organising high quality peer based assessments of study programmes. These assessments stimulate self-reflection within higher education institutions and offer suggestions from peers to further improve the quality of study programmes. Through this system of external assessments society gets independent information about the quality of higher education. VLUHR QA has the ambition to further disclose the results of the study programme assessments in order to share best practices and to inform (potential) students. VLUHR QA also aims to increase its participation in ENQA and on other international fora, both to learn from others and to share its expertise. In order to reduce the dependence on the market of study programme assessments VLUHR QA envisages to prepare for the future by investigating potential diversification, e.g. through the development of VLUHR QA as an expertise centre for Quality in Higher Education.

VLUHR QA is looking forward to the exchange with the distinguished panel of international experts during the site visit of this peer review. We are confident that the exchange of ideas will provide us with useful input to continue improving the work we do.

**Maria Weymans**  
Director VLUHR QA

**Nik Heerens**  
Chair VLUHR QA Board

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# **PART 1**

## Quality assurance in Flanders





# 1 The context

## 1.1 The Flemish higher education system

VLUHR QA operates in Flanders. The Flemish Government, as one of the three Autonomous Communities of the Belgian federal state, is responsible for education in Flanders. The Higher Education Codex<sup>1</sup> provides the legal framework for higher education in Flanders.

### Institutions

The Flemish Government has defined two types of higher education institutions. **Statutory registered institutions** and **non-statutory registered institutions**.

Five universities ('universiteiten') and seventeen university colleges ('hogescholen'), along with a number of institutes for post-initial education, the 'Evangelisch-Theologische Faculteit' and the 'Faculteit voor Protestantse Godgeleerdheid', belong to the group of **statutory registered institutions** (situation March 2014). These institutions are recognised by law and have a not-for-profit-status and cater for over 95% of higher education students. An overview of these institutions is given in Table 1.

<sup>1</sup> Higher Education Codex, 11/10/2013, Art.II.121-132

Table 1 Number of students in statutory registered Flemish Higher Education institutions (31/10/2013)<sup>2</sup>

| Universities   | Students       | University colleges  | Students       |
|--|----------------|--|----------------|
| Katholieke Universiteit Leuven                                   | 46,697         | Artesis Plantijn Hogeschool Antwerpen                          | 8,410          |
| Universiteit Antwerpen   | 17,184         | Arteveldehogeschool  | 11,764         |
| Universiteit Gent  | 36,443         | Erasmushogeschool Brussel                                      | 4,774          |
| Universiteit Hasselt +<br>transnationale Universiteit<br>Limburg | 5,153          | Groep T – Internationale Hogeschool Leuven                     | 841            |
| Vrije Universiteit Brussel                                       | 10,658         | Hogere Zeevaartschool  | 707            |
|  |                | Hogeschool Gent  | 12,852         |
|  |                | Hogeschool PXL   | 6,756          |
|  |                | Hogeschool West-Vlaanderen                                     | 5,419          |
|  |                | HUB-KAHO   | 10,483         |
|  |                | Karel de Grote-Hogeschool –<br>Katholieke Hogeschool Antwerpen | 11,355         |
|  |                | Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven                                   | 7,692          |
|  |                | Katholieke Hogeschool Limburg                                  | 5,942          |
|  |                | Katholieke Hogeschool Vives Noord                              | 3,315          |
|  |                | Katholieke Hogeschool Vives Zuid                               | 8,180          |
|  |                | LUCA School of Arts  | 2,419          |
|  |                | Thomas More Kempen   | 6,457          |
|  |                | Thomas More Mechelen-Antwerpen                                 | 6,423          |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>116,135</b> | <b>Total</b>   | <b>113,789</b> |

Universities and university colleges are recognized by law and receive public funds, irrespective of their private or public legal status. Universities also operate in the fields of scientific research and social and scientific services to the community. University colleges participate in scientific research, including research into the arts, within the framework of so-called ‘associations’. They also have a mandate to operate in the fields of project-based scientific research and, like universities, in the field of social and scientific services to the community. University colleges which organise degree programmes in Audiovisual and Fine Arts or in Music and Performing Arts have been assigned the additional mission of the development and practice of the arts.

An association is a separate legal entity for collaboration between one university and one or several university colleges. An important function of the associations is to optimise the collaboration between university colleges and universities in order to adopt academic standards – i.e. embedding this education in scientific research – in academically oriented study programmes at the university colleges. In 2013, this process led to the integration of all academically oriented bachelor’s and master’s programmes into universities (involving 23,000 students), except those in the field of the arts and of nautical science. University colleges continue to offer professionally oriented bachelor’s programmes and education in the arts and in nautical science. As a consequence of the transfer of 23,000 students from university colleges to universities, a new round of mergers of university colleges is currently taking place.

<sup>2</sup> Hoger Onderwijs in Cijfers, 2013-2014, [http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/werken/studentadmin/studentengegevens/HOIC\\_2013.pdf](http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/werken/studentadmin/studentengegevens/HOIC_2013.pdf)

Other institutions can also offer higher education if they register formally with the Flemish Government. These are the **non-statutory registered institutions**. The registration procedure involves proving financial solvency and drawing up collaboration agreements with statutory registered institutions guaranteeing students, study programme continuity. Seven such institutions are registered at this moment: Vesalius College, Inno.com, College of Europe, University of Kent, Continental Theological Seminary, Flanders Business School and von Karman Institute. These institutions do not receive funding from the Government. Together they offer education to about 1000 students.

### Study programmes

The structure of higher education in Flanders is defined by the Higher Education Codex<sup>3</sup>. Five types of study programmes are distinguished. Associate degrees, academic and professional bachelor's programmes, master's programmes and doctoral programmes correspond respectively with levels 5, 6, 7 and 8 of the European Qualification Framework (EQF) and are congruent with the Dublin descriptors. Post-graduate teacher training programmes are not linked to the EQF. An overview of the higher education structure is shown in Figure 1. Within programmes, variants can be defined (location, majors, type of provision, ...).

Figure 1 **Higher education in Flanders**

| EQF | Academic higher education            | Professional higher education       | Adult education                                     | ECTS   |
|-----|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|--------|
|     | Universities and university colleges | University Colleges                 | Centres for Adult Education and university colleges |        |
| 5   |                                      | Higher vocational education (HBO 5) | Higher vocational education (HBO 5)                 | 90-120 |
| 6   | Bachelor (academic orientation)      | Bachelor (professional orientation) |   | ≥ 180  |
|     |                                      | Advanced bachelor                   |   | ≥ 60   |
| 7   | Master                               |                                     |   | ≥ 60   |
|     | Advanced master                      |                                     |   | ≥ 60   |
| 8   | PhD                                  |                                     |   |        |
|     | Post-graduate teacher training       | Post-graduate teacher training      | Post-graduate teacher training                      | 60     |
|     | Post-graduate study programmes       | Post-graduate study programmes      |   |        |

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

All accredited bachelor's and master's programmes are listed in the Higher Education Register, which is managed by NVAO ([www.hogeronderwijsregister.be](http://www.hogeronderwijsregister.be)). Higher education institutions enjoy full autonomy in designing a curriculum but must take into account the requirements ensuing from the Higher Education Codex's provisions. The workload of study programmes is measured in credits. One credit stands for 25 to 30 hours of workload. A full-time study programme amounts to 60 credits per year.

Most higher education in Flanders is organised in Dutch. Strict language regulations are in place for bachelor's programmes (maximum 6% of the total offer of initial bachelor's programmes may be organised in another language than Dutch) and to a lesser extent for master's programmes (maximum 35% of the total offer of Master's programmes may be organised in another language than Dutch). Every member of both teaching and academic staff must have an adequate level of competence in the language in which (s)he teaches a course (generally a minimum level of C1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages is required)<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Higher Education Codex, Art.II.57-119

<sup>4</sup> Higher Education Codex Art.II.260-272

### A detailed look at study programmes

**Professionally oriented bachelor's programmes** (minimum 180 credits) confer a *bachelor's degree* in a specific field. They are mainly based on the application of scientific knowledge and on practical knowledge. They serve as an entry qualification for a profession and are intended to bring students to the level of general and specific knowledge and competence needed for the independent practice of a profession or group of professions. Professional bachelor's programmes are only organised by university colleges. *Advanced bachelor's programmes* (*bachelor-na-bachelor* – minimum 60 credits) are accessible to holders of a bachelor's degree only and also confer a bachelor's degree. Such study programmes are intended to broaden or deepen the knowledge and competences acquired in a professional bachelor's programme.

**Academically oriented bachelor's programmes** (minimum 180 credits) also confer a *bachelor's degree* in a particular field. They are intended to bring students to a level of knowledge and competence associated with scientific or artistic functioning in general and with a specific field of the sciences or arts in particular. The objective of the academic bachelor is to entitle students to progress to a master's programme or to enter the labour market. Academically oriented bachelor's programmes are offered by universities and, when in the domain of Arts and Nautical science, by university colleges.

Anyone who finishes secondary school successfully can enter a bachelor's programme in Flemish higher education. The intake is only restricted for a few study programmes (study programmes for medical doctors and dentists and certain arts programmes).

**Master's programmes** (minimum 60 credits) are intended to bring students to an advanced level of knowledge and competence associated with scientific or artistic functioning in general and with a specific field of the sciences or arts in particular, as required for the autonomous practice of the sciences or arts, or for the application of scientific or artistic knowledge in the independent practice of a profession or group of professions. A master's programme is concluded with a master's thesis. Most master's programmes count 60 or 120 credits. In Medicine a 240 credits programme is offered. Master's programmes are offered by universities and, when in the domain of Arts and Nautical science, by university colleges.

To register for a master's programme, the general condition is the possession of a bachelor's degree. The institution may set further specific qualification requirements. Students with an academic bachelor's degree who cannot gain direct admission to a given master's programme may be able to enter the study programme in question via a preparatory curriculum. Students graduating from a professional bachelor's programme can take a bridging programme in order to be admitted to a master's programme. *Advanced master's programmes* (*master-na-master* – minimum 60 credits) are accessible to holders of a master's degree only. For those study programmes the same legal requirements apply.

In addition to the Bachelor's teacher education programmes which train nursery, primary and secondary school teachers (the integrated teacher training programme), it is also possible to take a teaching degree programme subsequent to the initial programme: the **post-graduate teacher education programme**. The curriculum size of these teacher education programmes is 60 credits. The post-graduate teacher education programmes are organized by universities, university colleges and the centres for adult education (CVO – Centra voor volwassenenonderwijs).

Besides bachelor's, master's and post-graduate teacher education programmes which are subject to external assessment by VLUHR QA, some other types of programmes exist in Flemish higher education, such as associate degrees, PhD programmes and postgraduate certificates. These programmes are not subject to assessment by VLUHR QA.

**Associate degrees** (*gegradueerde* – 90-120 credits) offer higher vocational education. These programmes prepare for a specific vocation. Associate degrees are organised by centres for adult education or university colleges.

The aim of **doctoral programmes** is to train researchers who are able to contribute autonomously to the development and growth of scientific knowledge. The doctoral thesis must demonstrate the ability to create new scientific knowledge in a given field or across different fields on the basis of independent scientific research, including the arts, and must have the potential to lead to scientific publications. A doctorate can only be obtained at a university or in collaboration with a university within an association. The possession of a master's degree is a general condition for enrolment for doctoral research. However, the institution may set additional requirements or grant exceptions. In recent years, all universities have developed PhD programmes in order to support junior researchers during their doctoral research.

Universities and university colleges may also organise study programmes within the boundaries of their educational competence which lead to a **postgraduate certificate**. These are study programmes whose curriculum consists of at least 20 credits and which are intended, within the context of further professional training, to broaden or deepen the competences acquired on the completion of a bachelor's or master's programme.

## 1.2 Evaluation of higher education

Since 1991, a system of independent peer review at study programme level has existed in Flanders, first for universities and later also for university colleges. Until 2004 the system focused primarily on quality improvement. From 2005 till 2013 the quality assurance system built on the previous system. Peer review at study programme level continued, but accreditation by the independent Accreditation Organization for the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) has been added. In addition to improvement, the assessments focused more on accountability. Study programmes had to score positive on six themes (aims and objectives, curriculum, staff, services, internal quality assurance and results) to get positive accreditation.

Since 2013, a system of institutional reviews, combined with ex-ante accreditation of new study programmes and 8-yearly study programme assessments and accreditation, is in place. Within this system, VLUHR QA is responsible for the organization of study programme assessments<sup>5</sup>.

In the new round of assessments, which started in 2013, **study programme assessment and accreditation** continue as before. The Flemish Government has chosen a three-layered system of quality assurance at study programme level. Institutions are responsible for the organization of their internal quality assurance system. Every eight years a clustered external peer review is organised by, in principle, VLUHR QA. VLUHR QA is legally recognised to organise these assessments, but other EQAR-registered agencies can also organise assessments. Accreditation by NVAO forms the third layer in the system.

<sup>5</sup> Higher Education Codex Art.II.121-173

Essential features of the external quality assurance system are: it relates to the level of a study programme, clusters of study programmes are evaluated within the same project and it starts with a critical self-evaluation report which the study programmes are required to compose. A panel of – in principle 4 – independent experts, composed in consultation with the institutions, visits the study programmes, discusses the quality of the study programme with all relevant stakeholders, and forms a judgement about the quality and formulates recommendations for improvement. The study programme assessment is concluded with the publication of a public assessment report. The reports include a comparative description and comparative tables. All criteria and procedures for the site visit and judgement are clarified in the Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education, known by the panel of experts and the institutions. The universities and university colleges pay the full cost of those assessments and the resulting assessment reports are used by them to apply for accreditation with NVAO.

Another important feature of the external quality assurance system is that it aims for transparent communication of the results, rather than a ranking system. The study programmes are assessed according to three generic quality standards, including different aspects of the study programme. The assessment report should show a study programme's quality profile. So, it is up to the reader of the reports to judge which aspects are most important and thus to evaluate which study programme fits best his/her needs.

If a higher education institution wants to start a new degree programme within the fields of study it is qualified for by the Higher Education Codex<sup>6</sup>, it needs an **ex-ante accreditation** and a positive result on a macro-efficiency test. Ex-ante accreditation is a competence of NVAO.

From 2015 on, **institutional reviews** will be added to the accreditation system. The institutional review will be compulsory for all statutory registered institutions in Flanders<sup>7</sup> and will be coordinated by NVAO. It is intended to be a periodical assessment of the policy processes that are put in place by a higher education institution to guarantee that it is carrying out its educational duties to a high standard of quality. In 2015-2017 a first round of institutional reviews will be organised as a pilot phase. Reviews are expected to focus on the improvement function and won't have formal consequences. In 2019-2021, a second round of institutional reviews will be held, with formal consequences.

Furthermore, the Higher Education Codex also stipulates that the universities and university colleges themselves must ensure a regular assessment, at least every eight years, of the quality of their institution's **research** activities. The Codex leaves it up to the institutions to organise these research assessments. Each university has developed its own system of peer review for research units, which is managed within each university. Besides the quality assurance on the level of research units, universities' research management has to be assessed by VLIR on a regular basis. VLIR has organised this type of external assessments of the research management of the Flemish universities in 2004 and 2010.

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<sup>6</sup> Higher Education Codex, Art.II.78-106

<sup>7</sup> 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.

## 2 VLUHR QA

### 2.1 History of VLUHR QA

In accordance with the Higher Education Codex<sup>8</sup> VLUHR QA is responsible for carrying out external quality assessments of study programmes in higher education in Flanders. VLUHR QA is the only Flemish quality assurance agency and is the result of a long integration process of the quality assurance units of VLIR and VLHORA.

The task of organising external assessments for universities was entrusted to the VLIR from the start of external assessments in 1991. Within VLIR it was the Quality Assurance Unit which carried out this role until 2012. In 2000 VLHORA was appointed as the quality assurance agency for the Flemish university colleges. Within VLHORA it was the Quality Assurance Unit that carried out this role until 2012.

In 2009, the Flemish Government requested VLIR and VLHORA to bring their quality assurance activities together in one organization, the Flemish Higher Education Council (VLUHR). VLUHR therefore has been formally established by the Flemish universities, university colleges and associations at 20th December 2010. The operational integration took until 2013 because of differences in the positions of the VLIR and VLHORA Boards on the strengthened cooperation and on the structure and the leadership of VLUHR and its quality assurance unit.

The peer review panels which evaluated the quality assurance units of VLIR and VLHORA in 2008 and 2009 suggested to improve the governance structures in order to find a better balance between ownership of the higher education institutions and independence of the quality assurance units. Due to the planned merger, the establishment of an independent Quality Assurance Board was postponed until the new structures were in place. As soon as VLUHR QA was formally established, it created the independent VLUHR QA Board. VLUHR assigned all operational decisions about the organization's quality assurance activities to the VLUHR QA Board. This delegation creates additional guarantees for the independent processes of VLUHR QA. The new structure separates the governance structure and the quality assurance activities of VLUHR QA.

<sup>8</sup> Higher Education Codex, Art.II.121-132 (see Annex 1)

In 2013 the operational integration of the two quality assurance units has been carried out. Under the leadership of a newly hired director quality assurance, VLUHR QA has been established. The former VLIR QA coordinator has been appointed as coordinator for academic study programmes and the former VLHORA QA coordinator has been appointed as coordinator for professionally oriented study programmes. The staff members of the two quality assurance units continued to work on the same projects until summer 2013, when a first reshuffle of assignments took place. Before that, all QA staff moved to the same side of the premises in April 2013. At the time of writing this report, the former VLIR and VLHORA staff are still formally employed by VLIR or VLHORA and seconded to VLUHR. Only new recruitments (the director and 4 additional staff members) have been directly hired as VLUHR staff. VLUHR QA has taken several initiatives to take the legal integration of all QA staff into VLUHR QA forward, but depends for this also on the cooperation of VLIR and VLHORA (more information is stated under 2.2 *Structure and resources*).

## 2.2 Structure and resources

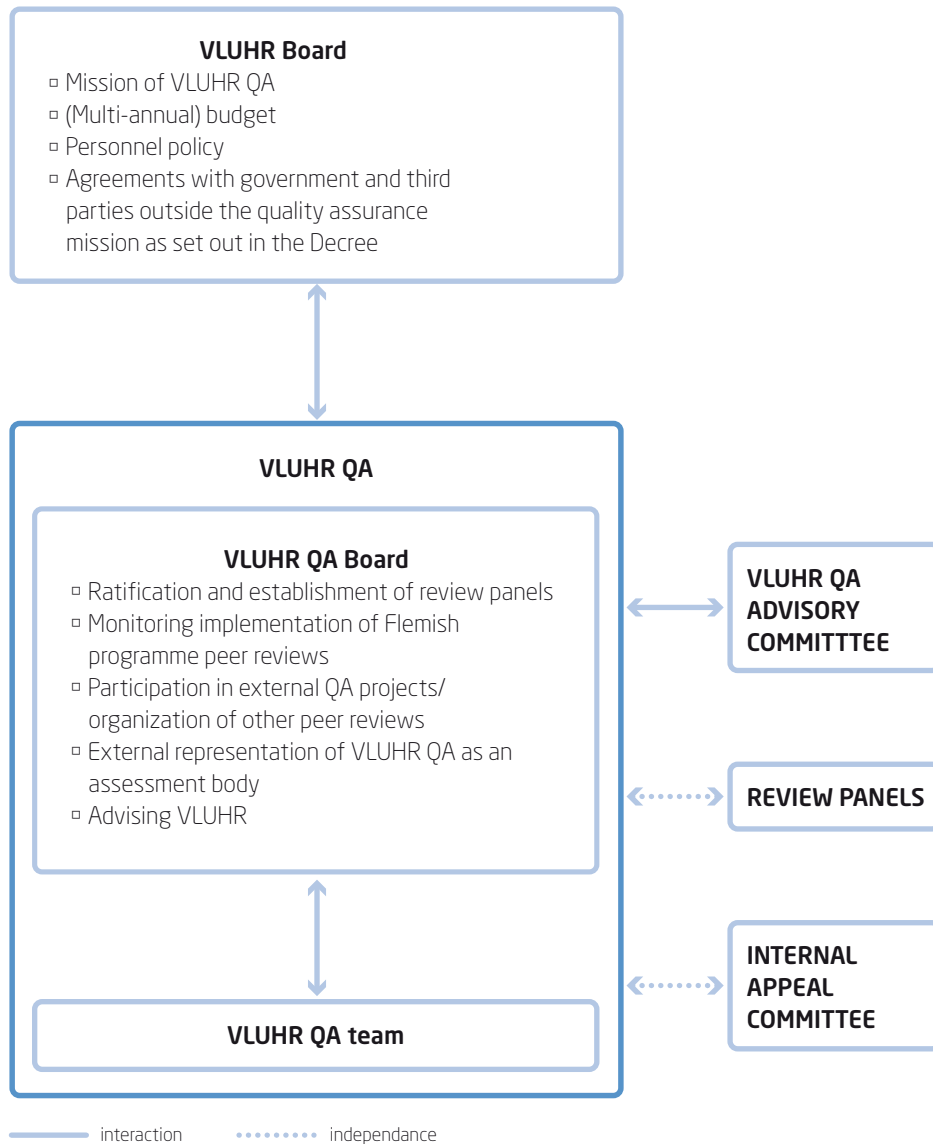
VLUHR is a not-for-profit organization established by all Flemish universities, university colleges and associations. The organization has as main goal to promote the cooperation between Flemish Higher Education Institutions and associations. Although VLIR and VLHORA continue to exist, VLUHR – as umbrella organization of those umbrella organizations – has become the official counterpart for the Flemish Government. VLUHR furthermore has specific tasks in the field of external quality assurance, international cooperation and development cooperation in the Flemish higher education system. For these activities VLUHR has the right to create independent entities. The first independent unit which has been created is VLUHR QA. It is governed by its own VLUHR QA Board.

### Governance structure

The **VLUHR Board and VLUHR General Assembly** consist of representatives of universities, university colleges and associations of universities and university colleges. In accordance with the Constitution of the organization, personnel decisions and decisions in relation to budgets and the financial position of VLUHR QA are made by the VLUHR Board on a recommendation by the VLUHR QA Board and/or the VLUHR QA Director. The VLUHR QA Board also advises the VLUHR Board on participation in external projects in the context of quality assurance and is responsible for the delivery of such projects.



Figure 2 Governance structure of VLUHR QA<sup>9</sup>



In line with the suggestions of the previous VLIR and VLHORA peer reviews, the independent VLUHR QA Board has been established, consisting of seven national and international quality assurance experts. VLUHR has granted the following powers to this VLUHR QA Board:

- the ratification and establishment of the review panels;
- monitoring and concrete implementation of the peer reviews and conformity of these with the ‘Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education’;
- participation in external projects in the context of quality assurance;
- external representation of the autonomous VLUHR QA, inter alia in dealing with organizations such as ENQA, INQAAHE, EQAR.

<sup>9</sup> Detailed information on the Governance structure is provided in Annex 2.

The VLUHR Board may also, in accordance with the expertise present in the VLUHR QA Board, call upon the VLUHR QA Board to make recommendations on the operation and development of the quality assurance system in Flanders. The VLUHR QA Board ensures that VLUHR QA and the institutions are able, in dialogue, to ensure the development of a high-quality and broadly-supported quality assurance system.

Important themes the QA Board dealt with over the past year include:

- the mission and vision, as well as the strategic plan of VLUHR QA;
- the ratification of assessment panels;
- the preparation for this external peer review.

The **quality assurance staff** is responsible, under the leadership of the Director, for coordinating peer reviews of study programmes; monitoring developments in the area of quality assurance; participating in external projects in the area of quality assurance; providing services in the area of quality assurance to higher education institutions; and preparing, implementing and monitoring decisions taken by the VLUHR QA Board.

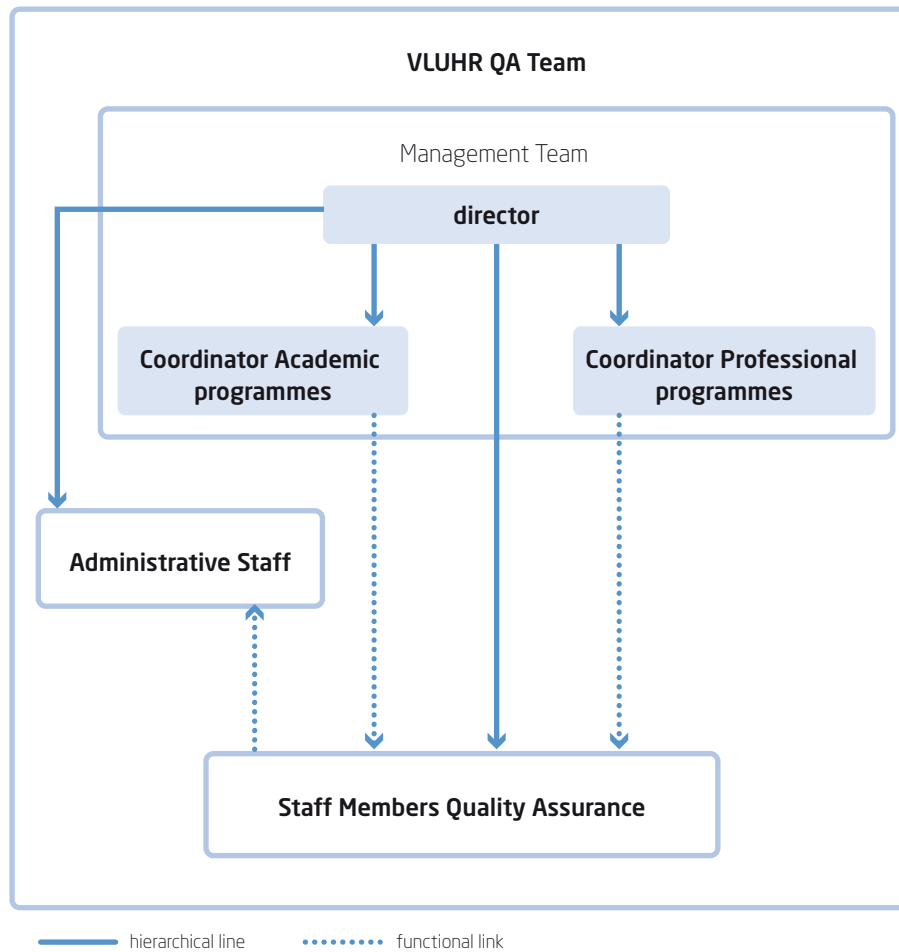
Higher education institutions, students and social partners are involved in the activities of VLUHR QA through their representation on the **VLUHR QA Advisory Committee**. This committee is made up of 16 representatives of higher education institutions, 2 student representatives and 3 representatives of the social partners. The VLUHR QA Advisory Committee can discuss all matters concerning the external quality assurance policy and the assessment procedures. VLUHR QA can request advice of the committee but the advisory committee can also give advice on her own initiative. All recommendations are presented to the VLUHR QA Board, where they are discussed and a motivated decision is taken to accept or deny a recommendation, depending on its feasibility in the current legal framework.

The VLUHR QA Board establishes and instructs the **peer review panels** which assess the higher education programmes independently. It has also appointed an **internal appeal committee** which independently assesses appeals of study programmes with a negative score on a generic quality standard (more information is stated under 2.4 external quality assurance activities).

### **Internal organization of VLUHR QA**

The internal organization structure of VLUHR QA is set out below. The Director is responsible for day-to-day management and is assisted in this by two coordinators. Together they form the management team of VLUHR QA. The Furthermore, VLUHR QA includes Administrative Support Staff and Staff Members QA. The organization chart of VLUHR QA is shown in Figure 3. A list of the personnel can be found in Annex 3.

Figure 3 Organization chart of VLUHR QA Team



At the general staff meetings (every two weeks) a broad range of items are considered, ranging from internal organizational issues to discussions about current developments in the area of quality assurance and higher education at a national or international level. For a more detailed discussion about educational assessments, separate meetings are organised with all staff involved in the assessments of professionally oriented programmes and for those involved in academically oriented programmes. Furthermore, VLUHR QA has set up two permanent working groups for the policy making on internal quality assurance and on communication of the agency: the Working Group on Internal QA (VLUHR QA IQA working group) and the Working Group on Marketing and Communication (VLUHR QA M&C working group). To prepare policy making on specific topics, ad hoc working groups are composed. This was for example the case for the preparation of this peer review process. All staff members are involved in working groups but the structure and composition of working groups is flexible and is changed whenever relevant.

**Human resources**

As the quality of the organization is defined for a large part by the quality of the staff and the conditions in which they have to work, the human resources policy aims to create a pleasant and challenging work environment, with room for each staff member’s own professionalism and for career development. VLUHR QA is developing a human resources policy which should serve as a basis for selection and recruitment, development and guidance of all staff members.

In order to meet its ambitions VLUHR QA needs well trained staff who are experts in their job and who cultivate professional skills. VLUHR QA believes in the quality of its staff. Staff receive space and trust to take responsibility for their activities within an agreed frame. Furthermore, the staff should be challenged to get the best out of themselves, in order to contribute to the continuous growth of knowledge and expertise within VLUHR QA. A performance management review cycle is being developed as an instrument to realise this.

In order to allow the staff to work as efficient as possible, all conditions are created to offer staff members the necessary flexibility to work. A flexible system of working at home is in place. Monitoring of the activities done by staff members is mainly focused on the quality of outputs such as assessment reports.

The **workforce** is defined in a multi-annual budget, which has been developed on the basis of the planned study programme assessments and which has been agreed upon by the VLUHR General Assembly.

VLUHR QA consists of 22 employees, representing 21,10 full time equivalents (FTE). 17 staff members quality assurance (16.3 FTE) are responsible for the coordination of the study programme assessments. 2 administrative assistants (1.80 FTE) are responsible for administrative support. Table 2 shows the evolution of the workforces of the quality assurance units of VLIR and VLHORA and of VLUHR QA.

Table 2 Evolution of the workforce since 2010

| Date                      | 1 jan 2010 |     | 1 jan 2011 |     | 1 jan 2012 |      |
|---------------------------|------------|-----|------------|-----|------------|------|
| Number of staff           | N          | FTE | n          | FTE | n          | FTE  |
| <b>VLIR</b>               |            |     |            |     |            |      |
| Coordinator               | 1          | 1   | 1          | 1   | 1          | 1    |
| Staff members             | 8          | 8   | 8          | 8   | 7          | 6,8  |
| Administrative assistants | 2          | 1,5 | 2          | 1,3 | 2          | 1,3  |
| <b>VLHORA</b>             |            |     |            |     |            |      |
| Coordinator               | 1          | 1   | 1          | 1   | 1          | 1    |
| Staff members             | 6          | 5,4 | 8          | 7,5 | 11         | 10,5 |
| Administrative assistants | 1          | 1   | 1          | 1   | 1          | 1    |

| Date                      | 1 jan 2013 |       | 1 jan 2014 |       |
|---------------------------|------------|-------|------------|-------|
| Number of staff           | n          | FTE   | N          | FTE   |
| <b>VLUHR</b>              |            |       |            |       |
| Director                  | 1*         | 1*    | 1          | 1     |
| Coordinators              | 2          | 2     | 2          | 2     |
| Staff members             | 14         | 13.30 | 17         | 16.30 |
| Administrative assistants | 3          | 2.30  | 2          | 1.80  |

\* The director started on 01/02/2013

FTE: Full time equivalents, n: number of staff

VLUHR QA has chosen to assign the full responsibility of each assessment project to one staff member. Each project consists of a cluster of study programmes within the same field. Only when a cluster of assessments is too big for one staff member to manage the project as well as to take part in all assessment visits and write all reports, additional staff members are assigned to the project. Combining the work of project manager and secretary of the panel guarantees an efficient use of resources and continuity in the communication to the involved programmes and the panel. Experiences with projects with parallel panels involving several staff members and separate panels have led to plans to evaluate the organization of this type of big programme clusters in the course of 2014.

The allocation of projects to staff members takes into account the complexity and expected workload of each staff member. Nevertheless, it is difficult to prevent peaks in workload, both because of the concentration of assessment visits in the periods of October to December and February to April and because of unexpected extra work (such as the replacement of panel members due to illness and appeals procedures). The flexibility staff members receive to organise their work is a necessary condition to be able to cope with peaks in workload. The flexibility to organise work is seen by most staff members as an important strength within the staff policy. Furthermore, in the allocation of projects, preferences of staff members are taken into account as far as possible. To take these preferences into account more structurally, this will become part of the performance management review cycle.

In order to guarantee neutrality staff members do not take projects related to programmes which they have studied themselves. Because staff members are specialists in relation to the assessment procedures and framework, they are neutral towards the substance of the assessment. No substantial subject specialization is in place and staff members are also involved in projects for both universities and university colleges.

VLUHR QA sees the available workforce as the bare minimum to deliver the necessary quality in the implementation of study programme assessments. To further substantiate its observations about the workload VLUHR QA plans a more detailed evaluation of the workload of the staff members in the course of 2014.

Besides the permanent staff, VLUHR QA engages external experts as members of the VLUHR QA Board and of its peer review panels. The members of the QA Board receive a financial compensation for their work. Members of the peer review panels receive a compensation based on the expected amount of work.

As indicated above, the VLUHR Board has the overall responsibility for personnel policy. So VLUHR QA is dependent on the decisions taken by the VLUHR Board in this field. VLUHR QA results from the integration of the VLIR and VLHORA QA units but the staff has remained largely on the payroll of VLIR and VLHORA. The decision to fully transfer all quality assurance staff to VLUHR has been taken in February 2014. At the time of writing this self-evaluation report, the implementation of this decision hasn't been completed yet. VLUHR QA hopes that the integration process will be finalised by the summer of 2014. This should result in equal labour conditions (financial, holidays, meal vouchers, ...) for all staff members of VLUHR QA. In the past year, as well as during the self-evaluation process, the VLUHR QA staff indicated the finalisation of the integration process of the quality assurance units of VLIR and VLHORA into VLUHR QA as an important challenge.

### Financial resources

The total VLUHR QA budget consists of a **general budget** for its overall role as a quality assurance agency and a **budget line for the specific external assessments** organised by VLUHR QA. VLUHR uses separated budgets and analytical bookkeeping for VLUHR QA to maintain its financial independence within the overall organization. The general budget is funded by all universities and university colleges, proportional to their scale. All costs related to the external assessments are charged to the account of the institution(s). VLUHR QA uses a transparent system of allocated expenses per clustered assessment, approved by the General Assembly of VLUHR on 12th December 2012. This budget is based on several parameters. Firstly, the expected staff cost is based on the expected workload and the average staff cost. Secondly, expenses for panel members are budgeted based on the number of panel members, travel expenses and the expected workload. Thirdly, costs for internal meetings of the panels and lay-out of the report are budgeted.

The total budget amounts to 18,390,849 euro for the assessment cycle 2013-2020. Table 3 gives an overview of the year-to-year evolution as budgeted in 2013.

The planning of assessments depends on the due date of the accreditation. The expected annual budgets depend on the number of assessments which are planned in a certain year. In order to prepare for the peak in workload in 2013, four staff members have been hired with a one year contract. VLUHR QA wants to attract additional resources in the years with a lower income from study programme assessments, in order to keep the workforce stable.

Table 3 **Total VLUHR QA multi-annual budget**

| Year   | 2013      | 2014      | 2015      | 2016      | 2017      | 2018      | 2019      | 2020      |
|--------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Budget | 1,999,242 | 2,876,986 | 2,422,376 | 2,477,078 | 1,976,397 | 2,379,778 | 2,344,199 | 1,914,793 |

Attempts have been made to reduce the cost of external quality assurance in the current assessment round. Indeed, higher education institutions complained about the financial burden of study programme assessments. In order to create a more cost-efficient system, a combination of institutional reviews and 'limited' study programme assessments was made for the 2013-2020 assessment round.

At the level of programme assessments, several budget reductions have been implemented. The budgeted workload per assessment has been reduced, as a result of shorter site visits and shorter reports. A second measure is the reduction of the size of panels. Panels consist of four panel members, including one student member (in comparison to the previous situation of five or six experts, including a student member). With these restrictions, it is sometimes difficult to cover all necessary expertise (different domains within the study programmes; educational expertise; the professional field; audit and quality assurance expertise; international expertise; knowledge of the national educational system and the student perspective). For complex assessment clusters, additional panel members can be added to the panel, but higher education institutions are reluctant to do so because of the budgetary consequences. A third saving is the result of shorter site visits (one day per study programme plus preparation time for the panel). This has an impact on the cost of hotels and meals, but mainly on the fees panel members receive. A fourth saving measure is that reports won't be published in hard copy any longer; next to pdf, only print-on-demand versions are available as the available budget doesn't allow VLUHR QA to print all reports anymore. If possible, in the future the pdf-reports will also be offered in a specific format for e-readers.

As a result of these saving measures, an overall budget reduction of 15 percent has been realised in relation to the budgeting approach in the previous assessment round. Some higher education institutions hoped for even more savings, as their own budgets have been impacted by the economic crisis and as NVAO promised that the administrative and financial burden of study programme assessments would be reduced by 25%. However, VLUHR QA doesn't see options for further savings without serious impact on the quality of its work within the current approach of study programme assessments. Feedback from the Netherlands, where the new approach was implemented earlier, confirm that the actual reduction in workload is much smaller than was promised.

#### **Material resources**

The VLUHR QA premises are located in the city centre of Brussels. The premises are shared with other VLUHR-staff, VLIR, VLHORA, Flanders Knowledge Area (an organization which contributes to the internationalisation of Flemish higher education) and EURASHE (the European Association of Higher Education Institutions). 5 meeting rooms are available. The pressure on these meeting rooms is high, which sometimes leads to the need of organising meetings at the premises of other organizations.

The director and coordinator have their own office to allow them to have individual meetings with staff members and other guests. All staff members have their own desk in shared offices. Due to the recent increase in the number of staff members, some offices are shared among 4 staff members, while these are initially designed for only 2 persons. All staff members have their own laptop which can be used at the office, at home and during site visits, which makes it possible to reduce the pressure on the available offices. The possibility to work regularly at home is appreciated by all staff members. At the premises several shared printers are available.

### **2.3 Mission - vision - strategy**

#### **Strategic planning**

The tasks and responsibilities of VLUHR QA have been defined in the Higher Education Codex. However, no detailed discussions on the mission of the newly established quality assurance unit took place before the integration process. As soon as VLUHR QA was operational, a process started to define the mission and vision of the new organization. This process has mainly been organised bottom-up with a working group of staff members and input from the other staff members. The text has been agreed upon by the VLUHR Board after consultation with the VLUHR QA Advisory Committee and the VLUHR QA Board.

VLUHR QA aims at implementing the plan-do-check-act (PDCA) cycle in all its operations. With defining the mission and vision (next 10 years) and a strategy (next 5 years) for the organization, a first step has been taken to implement the planning phase of the PDCA-cycle.

### **Mission statement**

VLUHR QA is an independent and external evaluation body in Flanders which contributes to safeguarding and continuous improvement of the quality of higher education.

VLUHR QA is an essential partner in the development and stimulation of a quality culture in higher education, and as a trend-setting centre of expertise it provides services to all concerned parties.

### **Vision statement**

VLUHR QA and its partners construct a broadly supported and propagated quality culture in higher education. On account of the independence and expertise of the organization itself and of the review panels it composes and supports, VLUHR QA maintains a unique position towards the educational institutions which creates the possibility of taking a fresh, critical and constructive look at the study programmes. In regard to external evaluations, VLUHR QA uses a previously published protocol and collaborates with independent, skilled and authoritative peers. The organization is registered with EQAR and operates according to the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG).

VLUHR QA works hand in hand with the institutions to guarantee and further develop a prime educational quality, with respect to the institutions' specific contexts and individual characteristics. If and when needed, it points out problems that require attention and challenges that might be taken up, as well as best practices which can serve as inspiration for others. VLUHR QA wants to confirm the trust of society at large in the quality of the study programmes and wants to stimulate and support the education and research institutions to achieve an internationally highly valued reputation.

VLUHR QA takes part in the realisation of a higher education area in which institutions and organizations communicate efficiently and transparently, both internally in order to promote a smooth operation as well as towards the outside world. The latter is performed with an explicit attention towards the (potential) student, enabling him/her to make rational and informed choices on the one hand and involving him/her in the setup of the study programme on the other hand.

With its experiences and expertise, VLUHR QA participates in both the scientific and the public debate and ensures a broad dissemination of valid information concerning quality assurance, learning and education.

VLUHR QA is at once a critical mirror and a source and supporter of innovation and knowledge exchange. A first investment to this end by the organization is the development of each of its employees to be experts in their field and the cultivation of their professional skills. They are the most important capital of the organization and are challenged to reach their maximum potential, creating a high quality performance and a continuous growth of knowledge and experience within VLUHR QA. Secondly, the organization sets up sustainable collaborations with sound partners. In doing so, VLUHR QA profiles itself as a valued and reliable knowledge partner in the area of quality assurance.

VLUHR QA represents involvement, expertise, independence, transparency and a constructive approach.



### Strategic objectives

Based on the mission and vision, two sessions have been organised with the whole team under the guidance of an external consultant to come to strategic objectives, operational objectives (3 years) and an action plan for 2014. The first session started with a reflection of all staff members of staff on the following questions:

- What is my contribution to the organization?
- What/how can I improve for the benefit of the organization?
- What are the strengths of our organization?
- What are the weaknesses of our organization?
- What are the opportunities and the threats of the organization, taken into account the larger society in which the organization is working in (political, economic, competitors, etcetera)?

The response of the team members led to a SWOT analysis and formed the basis of the strategic and operational objectives (see below). The full results of the SWOT-analysis will be available during the site visit.

In a second session with the external consultant the strengths and weaknesses have been confronted with the opportunities and threats. Based on this confrontation the team agreed on the following five strategic objectives (SO) to be achieved in a time frame of 5 years.

#### Strategic objectives for VLUHR QA

- 1 VLUHR QA seeks to work in a way that maintains **high quality** and **customer focus** in its activities as a **quality assurance agency**.
- 2 Acknowledging its role in society, VLUHR QA has a strong focus on providing information **efficiently** and **effectively**, for **stakeholders** in general and for (future) students in particular.
- 3 VLUHR QA strives to achieve **operational efficiency and an open and transparent organizational culture** in which staff take responsibility and are given space to develop as professionals and to grow either within or outside the organization.
- 4 Benefiting from its geographically central and strategic location within Europe, VLUHR QA wishes to continue the strategic development of its **international network** and to develop **international collaboration** with stakeholders in general and **cross-border evaluations** in particular.
- 5 Through **knowledge acquisition** and **knowledge sharing** (both within and outside the organization) VLUHR QA wishes to **develop into a leading expertise centre** so that it can provide services effectively to both society and stakeholders.

In the five strategic objectives VLUHR QA has sought a balance between improving the quality of its current operations and preparing for the future. VLUHR QA wants to further improve the way it organises external assessments of higher education study programmes. By focusing on the core of education VLUHR QA hopes to contribute to the quality culture within the different study programmes (SO1). VLUHR QA believes that the results of these study programme assessments are also valuable to inform society about the quality of higher education. It therefore focusses in SO2 on communication of those results. To be able to run high quality operations and to prepare for the future, investing in a strong organization and investing in personnel is crucial (SO3).

Besides the high quality implementation of study programme assessments VLUHR QA aims to closely follow international developments and to prepare for the future. VLUHR QA wishes to diversify its activities in order to be less dependent on the developments in relation to study programme assessments. Likely, higher education institutions in Flanders will not be obliged anymore to have their study programmes assessed externally by VLUHR QA after the end of this assessment round in 2020. VLUHR QA follows up international developments and is investigating options to become involved in projects such as cross-border evaluations (SO4). Finally, VLUHR QA wants to develop towards an expertise centre which plays a role in sharing expertise and experiences in developing quality and a quality culture in higher education in Flanders (SO5).

#### **Operational objectives and action plan**

After having developed five strategic objectives, the team defined operational objectives and actions for 2014 in order to contribute to the strategic objectives. The action plan 2014 will be available during the site visit.

Also a procedure has been developed for the systematic follow-up of the action plan and the preparation of yearly action plans from 2015 on. Every action plan will be developed based on the input of staff members, VLUHR QA working groups and input from relevant stakeholders.

#### **2.4 External quality assurance activities**

The Flemish Government assigns responsibility for internal and external quality assurance of education to the higher education institutions themselves. Thus each university or university college is responsible for internal quality assurance within the institution. Additionally, each higher education institution is required to submit its study programmes to an external assessment on a regular basis and to act on the findings and results of this external assessment. The organization of these external assessments is one of the competences of VLUHR, the umbrella organization of higher education institutions. As already mentioned, VLUHR delegates its external quality assurance activities to VLUHR QA. This close institutional link between the higher education institutions and the quality assurance agency is a strength of the Flemish system. It increases ownership and trust in the system. However, in external quality assurance it is important to balance this ownership and trust with independence. Apart from internal safeguards, in 2004 the Accreditation Organization for the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) has been established to guarantee this balance. NVAO checks the consistency and motivation of the judgement of the panels, as well as whether the independent functioning of the peer review panels is guaranteed.

The main task of VLUHR QA is to organise external assessments of higher education programmes in Flanders. In the period 2004-2012 VLIR organised 66 clustered assessments, involving 601 study programmes. VLHORA organised 90 external assessments, involving 546 study programmes. According to the current planning (August 2013) VLUHR QA will organise 114 clustered assessments, involving 987 study programmes during the assessment round 2013-2020<sup>10</sup>. The number of study programmes to be assessed in this round is lower than in the previous round. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, since the Flemish Government has developed 'rationalisation policies', programmes with few students aren't funded anymore. Most master's programmes which require a master's degree as entrance condition (master-na-master programmes) aren't funded anymore either. This has led to the integration of some of these programmes in other master's programmes or to the discontinuation of these programmes. A number of mergers between university colleges in recent years provides a second reason for the reduction of study programmes to be assessed. Study programmes that were previously offered at both partner institutions often continue to exist, but are now considered as variants of the same programme. A third reason lies in the integration of academic study programmes of university colleges into universities. Especially at the KU Leuven, which integrated study programmes of several university colleges, a merger of a number of these programmes has taken place. A fourth reason is the choice made by some engineering programmes to request accreditation from CTI (Commission des Titres d'Ingénieur, France). With this accreditation study programmes can request accreditation directly from NVAO, without going through a VLUHR assessment.

In addition to the eight-yearly assessments, study programmes which received a negative accreditation decision in the previous round could get a follow-up assessment after 1 to 3 years in order to check whether the quality has improved. 17 study programmes have requested such a follow-up assessment for the period 2013-2015. In the past, VLIR organised 10 and VLHORA organised 17 follow-up assessments. In the new assessment cycle, a similar system is in place.

Besides bachelor's and master's degrees, VLIR and VLHORA, and later VLUHR, were also assigned by the Flemish Government to organise the external assessment of all post-graduate teacher education programmes<sup>11</sup>. In 2011 and 2012 those 37 study programmes have been evaluated, following the same methodology as used for higher education programmes. The assessment framework was slightly adapted in collaboration with the involved institutions and the government to guarantee a fit-for-purpose approach.

The previous eight-year cycle of external assessments ended in 2012. For the 2013-2020 cycle the Government chose to keep external assessments at study programme level, although some changes were made based on the evaluation of the previous cycle. The study programme assessment and accreditation processes should be oriented more directly than before to aspects related to the primary process of teaching and learning and the outcomes of the education process. Personnel and internal quality assurance policies are only taken into account in the study programme assessment where these policies have direct impact. The policy of the institution as a whole will be assessed in the framework of institutional reviews. The 6 themes and 21 aspects from the previous framework have been cut down to three generic quality standards. Each of those standards focusses on one of the following three key questions:

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

<sup>10</sup> Overview available at <http://www.vluhr.be/default.aspx?PagelId=277>

<sup>11</sup> Higher Education Codex, Art.II.125

The generic quality standards are formulated as follows:

**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.

**Generic quality standard 2 - Teaching process**

The teaching process makes it possible for the students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

**Generic quality standard 3 - Outcome level achieved**

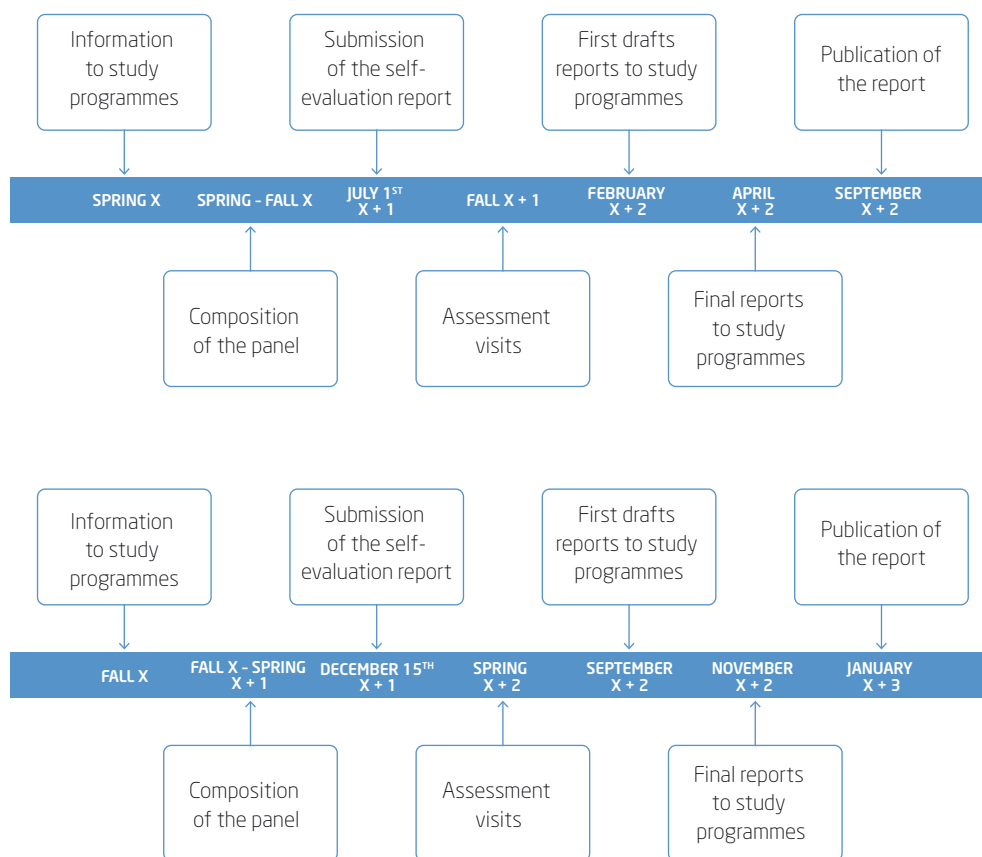
The study programme has an appropriate system of assessment, testing and examination and demonstrates that the intended learning outcomes are achieved.

As indicated before, institutional reviews have been added to the external quality assurance system and will commence in 2015. VLUHR QA is investigating the possibilities to contribute to these assessments.

**Steps in a peer review cycle**

VLUHR QA has developed a 'Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education', which sets out the arrangements for carrying out study programme assessments. An assessment project covers a year of preparation (information session, composition of the panel and preparation of the self-evaluation) and a year of implementation (preparation of the peer review panels, site visits, reporting phase). The time line is shown in Graph 4.

Figure 4 Time line of study programme assessments, starting in spring/fall



## 1 Preparation phase

In the preparatory phase, which covers a period of nine months, the coordinator and project manager inform the programme coordinators about the assessment process, including information on and suggestions for writing the self-evaluation report, and the study programmes write their self-evaluation report.

At the same time the project manager takes care of the composition of the panel. The study programmes have input in the first phase of the assessment panel selection by suggesting names of panel members with domain and educational expertise; audit and quality assurance expertise; international expertise; and knowledge of the national educational system. VLUHR QA also pays due regard to the criteria on independence, expertise and authority in the selection of the assessment panels. A student-member is selected by VVS, the Flemish student union. The VLUHR QA Board has to ratify every proposal for the composition of a panel before panel members are invited. First a proposal for a panel chair and a long list of other candidate members is presented to the VLUHR QA Board. After this, the chair person is invited and after acceptance, (s)he makes a proposal about the other panel members which is again presented to the VLUHR QA Board for ratification. As soon as the panel is complete, NVAO gives advice on the composition of the panel.

Before the start of an assessment project, all study programmes in a field of study have to design a common discipline-specific learning outcomes framework. NVAO validates that this framework is consistent with the Flemish Qualification Framework.

## **2 Site visit**

The site visit phase usually covers a period of around three months. During this phase, the project manager discusses the practical aspects of the site visit with the study programme management, the latter prepare for the site visit and, finally, the panel visits the study programmes. A site visit takes on average one day per study programme plus half a day of internal meeting time for the panel. During each site visit meetings are held with the study programme management, students, teaching staff, alumni, (where relevant) employers and support staff (e.g. student counselling). Also a tour around the main material resources of the study programme is planned, as well as a free consultation period for any supplementary interviews at the invitation of the assessment panel or at the request of a stakeholder. The site visit ends with a second meeting with the study programme management, the preparation for an oral report and the oral report itself.

## **3 Reporting phase**

The assessment process is finalised with the reporting phase, which takes about half a year. After the site visits the project manager or secretary writes the draft study programme reports. These draft reports are discussed with the review panel. Upon approval by the whole panel, each draft report is sent to the assessed study programme for comments. Study programmes are allowed to react within 3 weeks and can suggest factual corrections as well as other comments. The panel processes the responses (generally during an editorial meeting) of the study programmes and finalizes the programme reports. Besides the programme reports, the panel makes a comparative analysis and, if it wishes to, the panel can add a more policy oriented chapter in the final report. Study programmes also get the opportunity to react on the comparative analysis by the panel. Furthermore, the published report contains a description of the assessment process. Each programme also has to provide annexes with an analysis of the intended learning outcomes in relation to the Flemish Qualification Framework, a description of the study programmes, data on staff, on internationalization and on study success and these annexes are published on the VLUHR QA website. The panel has the full responsibility for the content of the report. No VLUHR body can change reports.

## **4 Appeals procedure**

The quality assurance units of VLIR and VLHORA have an internal appeal procedure since 2009. Between 2009 and 2013 the appeal procedure was used in seven cases. The procedure hasn't changed much in the new assessment round. At the time of the second feedback round (final study programme report), a study programme may file an appeal against the report in case of a negative generic quality standard score. An internal appeal committee then evaluates whether the assessment report is clear in its argumentation and whether the stated elements support the scores. The appeal committee can decide (1) that the complaint is unfounded, (2) that the panel should better substantiate its judgements, (3) that the panel should visit the study programme again in order to re-evaluate the relevant generic quality standard(s) again or (4) that a new panel should re-evaluate the relevant generic quality standard(s) again.

## **5 Accreditation**

After the assessment process has been completed, study programmes have to apply for accreditation with NVAO. NVAO decides to accredit the study programme based on the published VLUHR QA assessment report. NVAO may take three types of decisions; it may decide to grant or not to grant accreditation to a programme, or to grant it for a limited period. In the event of a decision to grant accreditation for a limited period, the institution may have a new, external assessment carried out on the generic quality standards on which the study programme (or the study programme variant) was not assessed as satisfactory. The option to grant accreditation for a limited period has been added in the new accreditation cycle. Previously, the Flemish Government could grant a study programme a temporary recognition based on a negative accreditation. In the new cycle this procedure has been

integrated in the accreditation process. Up to now, VLUHR QA doesn't have any experience with accreditation for a limited period, as the first assessment reports of the new assessment round have been published only recently and no decisions have been made by NVAO upon these reports yet.

### **First experiences with the new assessment round**

Based on formal and informal feedback from different stakeholders some first indications can be given about the experiences with the new assessment round. Study programmes, institutional coordinators for quality assurance and panel members have been surveyed electronically and a series of focus group meetings with representatives of the same groups have provided VLUHR QA with more qualitative feedback.

Although the quality assurance units of VLIR and VLHORA started preparing the new assessment round in 2011, a challenge at the beginning of the new cycle was the fact that the legal framework was only decided upon at 6th July 2012 and the accreditation framework on 13th May 2013. As the study programmes which were assessed in spring 2013 needed to start preparing this assessment in early 2012, this timing meant that all stakeholders involved had to work with preliminary procedures, hoping that no major changes would occur in the legal process or in the establishment of the NVAO-accreditation framework. Luckily, it turned out that only minor details changed during the final phase of the legal process and the establishment of the NVAO-accreditation framework. Still, working with preliminary versions, where changes could happen during the process, was far from optimal. The feedback from study programmes indicate that the initial start-up problems which resulted from the late approval of the legal framework for the new assessment round had been largely solved by fall 2013. Information provision and support by the VLUHR QA staff are generally seen as satisfactory.

Although much time and energy have been invested in developing clear internal procedures, identical interpretation of every step of internal procedures by all project managers has not always been achieved yet, e.g. in one clustered assessment with two parallel panels a common comparative analysis has been made for all programmes, while in a similar project a comparative analysis has been made per parallel panel. This is also pointed out by quality assurance coordinators from the higher education institutions. Intervision during team meetings has been introduced in order to further improve the consistency in the use of internal procedures. Certain procedures for exceptional cases (e.g. interuniversity programmes, procedures in English and follow-up of appeals procedures) are still under development. The aim is to finalise the development of these procedures by fall 2014.

Panel members and representatives from higher education institutions indicate that the new assessment approach is in general received positively because it allows a focus on the core of teaching and learning processes within each study programme. Study programmes and panel members appreciate this stronger focus on the core of the educational process. Although the open structure of the generic quality standards offers more space than previously to tell the own story of a programme, the limitation in number of pages in the report (25 for a study programme) is often seen as too restrictive to give the necessary information and to pay enough attention to vision and plans for the future.

Most of the study programmes report that they were adequately involved in the nomination of candidate members for the review panels. In case of big programme clusters, where parallel panels evaluate each a number of similar programmes in different institutions, it is sometimes difficult to find enough qualified experts, who are independent from the study programmes under review. Study programmes on average appreciate the final composition of the review panels. Due to the reduction in number of panel members quite a lot of study programmes report that the educational expertise in the panel could be stronger.

Surveys of VLUHR QA staff, reviewers and study programmes indicate that for a single programme the current site visit length (1 day) is the bare minimum for a panel to assess all relevant aspects of a programme. For more complex programmes with different locations or other variants, it is even more difficult to come to balanced and well-substantiated judgements. For combined visits of e.g. a bachelor's and a master's programme the site visit length (2 days) is generally seen as sufficient.

For the reporting phase, the survey findings are based only on the experiences of study programmes which have been visited in spring 2013, as those programmes were the only ones which had already received their reports at the time of writing this self-evaluation report. There is some disparity in the appreciation of the readability of the assessment reports. The comments in the survey show appreciations of two kinds expressed by the study programmes: strong appreciation for the quality of the reports on the one hand whilst expressing critical comments about poorly documented findings and recommendations on the other. The executive summary which has been introduced along with the new assessment round is generally seen as a positive addition to the system.

At the time of writing the self-evaluation report, the first applications for accreditation still had to be evaluated by NVAO. So, no evidence is available yet about how the new reports are appreciated by NVAO.

Within the new assessment round, four complaints have been submitted until now. VLUHR QA has analysed these four cases and plans a meeting with the internal appeal committee in order to discuss which improvements could be made in the operations of VLUHR QA in order to limit the number of complaints. In two cases the newly installed option to install a new panel for re-evaluation has been used. This option has been introduced in the new assessment round on request of the higher education institutions. On the basis of the first experiences, VLUHR QA staff does not see this option as an improvement. Hence, a new panel is asked to re-evaluate some aspects of a study programme, without being able to evaluate all aspects of the programme in a consistent manner and without a comparison with other study programmes in the same cluster. Also, the report of the partial re-evaluation needs to be integrated in a report of another panel. In the course of 2014, VLUHR QA will discuss with the internal appeal committee and with the higher education institutions whether the option to have a new panel installed needs to be sustained in the appeals procedure.

Finally, VLUHR QA notes that the more independent role it plays vis à vis the higher education institutions, in combination with the newly established procedures, sometimes leads to tensions with higher education institutions when they compare with the previous situation during which they perceived a closer relationship with the quality assurance units. VLUHR QA aims to communicate in a transparent and open way about these changes and the reasons behind its approach. This will remain a point of attention in the near future.

A more detailed report on the results of surveys and focus groups can be found in Annex 4.

## 2.5 International dimension

VLUHR QA pays special attention to the international dimension of external quality assurance. Flanders is a small region. In order to get new and independent insights, international experts (often from the Netherlands) have been involved in external quality assurance processes since their start in 1991. Already in the 1990's common assessments have been organised with the Dutch counterpart VSNU (predecessor of QANU).

Besides international input within assessment processes, VLUHR QA also highly esteems exchanges with other quality assurance agencies. Exchanges within ENQA and other international networks and projects allows for knowledge development and professional development for staff



of VLUHR QA, it can inspire the development of new procedures and it gives VLUHR QA the opportunity to share its own experiences and expertise. VLUHR QA investigates the possibilities to intensify international engagements through the active involvement in international projects, e.g. study programme assessments in other countries (Strategic objective 4).

The first partner region for international interactions has always been the Netherlands. VLUHR QA functions in a bi-national accreditation system for the Netherlands and Flanders, with the Accreditation Organization for the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) as a common accreditation organization. This system offers an international perspective on how the quality assurance system is built. Besides NVAO, VLUHR QA also maintains contacts with its counterpart of the French speaking part of Belgium and with its Dutch counterparts.

As already mentioned, participation in quality assurance networks in Europe and abroad is important. VLIR and VLHORA have both been members of ENQA since 2000. In April 2013 ENQA agreed to transfer the full membership status of VLIR and VLHORA to VLUHR QA as their legal successor. VLUHR QA, as VLIR and VLHORA previously, plays an active role within the ENQA structures and participates as much as possible in ENQA seminars and workshops. A VLUHR QA staff member is chair of the ENQA Working Group on KP3 (Knowledge on Part 3 of the ESG). VLUHR QA staff members are involved in ENQA-peer review panels which evaluate European QA agencies (European Chemistry Thematic Network Association – ECTNA, Unibasq – Spain and National Centre for Public Accreditation NCPA – Russia). In addition, staff members of VLUHR QA regularly give presentations about the Flemish quality assurance system at the European QA Forum (EQAF) and other seminars and conferences, as well as in response to requests from higher education institutions, NVAO and foreign delegations. VLUHR QA is furthermore member of INQAAHE (International Network of QA Agencies in Higher Education).

VLUHR QA aims to become more active in international projects. VLIR staff members have been involved in the definition of an assessment protocol and in the examination of the quality of education, research and management at the University of Luxembourg (Grand Duchy of Luxembourg). VLHORA staff members were involved in the set up of an accreditation system in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Staff members also played an active role in the E-xcellence+ and E-xcellence NEXT-projects coordinated by the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) which developed quality assurance tools for distance education.

Finally, VLIR and VLHORA were both registered in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). EQAR granted VLUHR QA provisional registration until 31/12/2014.

## 2.6 Internal quality assurance

VLUHR QA doesn't just aim for a quality culture in higher education study programmes, it also wants to have high quality internal processes and operations. An active involvement of all relevant stakeholders is necessary to keep track of the quality VLUHR QA delivers and how this is perceived.

### Stakeholder analysis

Considering the development of the internal quality assurance processes of VLUHR QA, an analysis has been made of the stakeholders that are involved in its operations, both on **strategic and operational level**. This analysis has been made on the basis of stakeholders' interest in the work VLUHR QA does and on the influence they have over the work of VLUHR QA. On the strategic level the Flemish Government defines the legal framework and NVAO develops the accreditation framework. On the operational level panel members, study programme management, staff and students play an important role. NVAO grants accreditation on the basis of VLUHR QA's reports and the Flemish Student Union VVS selects students for the assessment panels.

### Internal quality assurance system

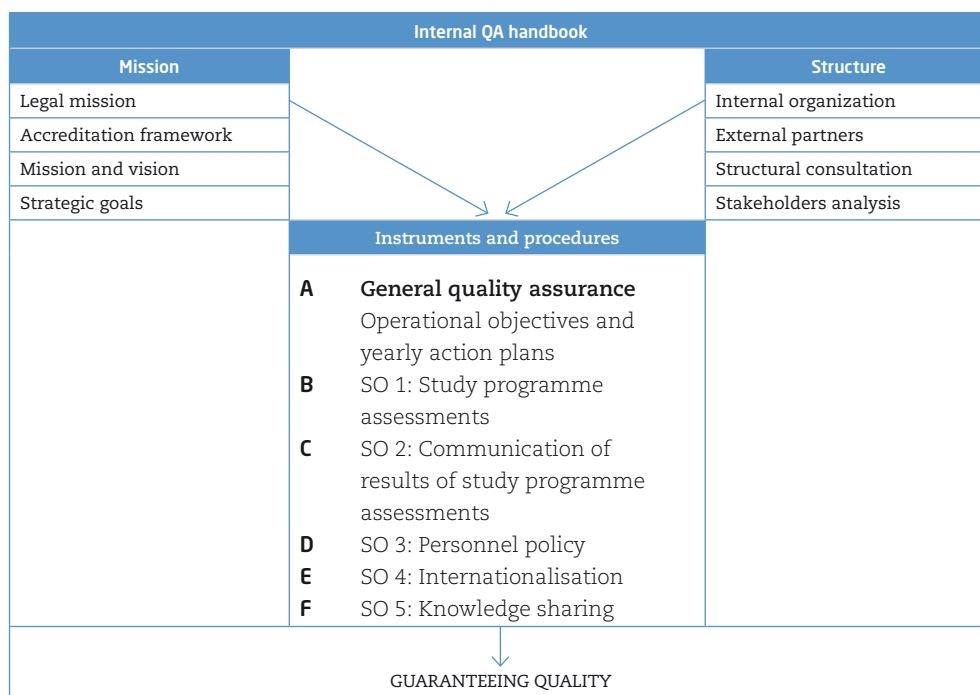
Since its establishment VLUHR QA has invested in the development of an own internal quality assurance (IQA) system to guarantee the quality of its operations and to foster quality improvement based on its stakeholder analysis. VLUHR QA has developed an IQA handbook which describes its legal and strategic framework, its organizational structure and its tools and procedures that guarantee its quality.

From 2011 onwards (prior to the establishment of VLUHR QA) a joint internal quality assurance working group, gathering staff from both VLIR and VLHORA, has prepared the feedback instruments (e.g. customer satisfaction surveys and structure of focus group discussions) for the new evaluation round. The VLUHR QA IQA working group has built on the strengths of both internal quality assurance systems of the former quality units of VLIR and VLHORA. It has developed all elements of the internal quality assurance processes and procedures, as presented in the VLUHR QA IQA handbook.

The structure of the IQA handbook is described in the figure below. The full IQA handbook will be on display during the site visit.

The IQA handbook comprises a description of the legal framework of VLUHR QA, as expressed in the Higher Education Codex, the accreditation framework and the VLUHR QA mission and vision statement as well as the strategic goals. The handbook also describes the organizational structure. This information has been summarised in this report under 2.2 Structure and resources and under 2.3 Mission – vision – strategy. The main part of the IQA handbook comprises the instruments and procedures used by VLUHR QA. The first chapter of this part describes the way the VLUHR QA strategic framework is operationalised into operational objectives and yearly action plans. The following five chapters describe the quality assurance procedures and tools per strategic objective.

Figure 5 Schematic overview of the items described in the Internal QA handbook



The IQA approach is based on the PDCA-cycle. The planning phase always starts from a bottom-up approach where staff members get the opportunity to give input and to discuss proposals. For the Do-phase clear procedures are developed. In the Check-phase a combination of internal consultation as well as external feedback are taken into account. On the basis of these inputs immediate action is taken where possible, while major improvements are implemented through yearly action plans.

As the assessments of higher education study programmes are the most important activities of VLUHR QA, internal quality assurance for these assessments is well developed.

### SO 1 - Study programme assessments

#### Plan

In cooperation with all involved higher education institutions the legal framework has been translated into a 'Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education' which gives a detailed overview of the procedures for external study programme assessments, both for study programmes and for panel members.

The 'Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education' has been complemented with an internal roadmap which describes the different phases of the external assessment projects. The roadmap refers to the appropriate documents to be used and assigns particular personnel groups to the execution or review of each step (*i.e. project managers, administrative staff or coordinators*) in order to exercise projects in a similar manner.

#### Do

The quality culture of VLUHR QA is initiated by the well-considered and careful execution of the everyday operations by the staff. All staff members organise the projects based on the 'Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education' and systematically consult the internal roadmap. Although VLIR and VLHORA used the same protocol, many procedures were implemented in a slightly different way. The differences in background led sometimes to a different implementation of the new procedures, too. At the moment of writing of this report, a detailed discussion on every step of the internal roadmap is held during team meetings in order to come to a more streamlined implementation of every step of the internal roadmap.

#### Check

- Exchange of experiences and ideas happens on a daily basis, among the VLUHR QA project managers and between the project managers and the coordinators of the higher education institutions. Besides this, VLUHR QA organises staff meetings for professionally oriented programmes and academically oriented programmes as well as general staff meetings in order to complement informal discussions with more formal consultation processes of all staff members.
- Each assessment panel meets in the beginning of the process to receive training about the process and prepare its work. During all meetings of the assessment panel the project manager or secretary (always staff members of VLUHR QA) are present to guarantee that processes are implemented in the correct way. At the end of each assessment process, all panel members are asked to fill in an online questionnaire and a selection of panel members are invited to hearings in order to get additional qualitative feedback.
- In case of parallel assessment panels (panels assessing the same type of study programmes in different institutions at the same time) panels and staff members are requested to consult regularly in order to balance the assessments made by the different parallel panels.

- Draft reports and communications are often read and checked by the coordinators for internal consistency, clarity of wording and sound argumentation.
- At any stage of the project the contact persons (at study programme and institutional level) can contact the project manager or the coordinator with questions, remarks or comments. More formally the contact persons (at study programme and institutional level) are surveyed for their satisfaction with the preparation and the conduct of the on-site visits by the assessment panel by means of a questionnaire (quantitative measures) which is sent out after the on-site visits. After the publication of the report the contact persons (at study programme and institutional level) are probed for their satisfaction a second time, on the reporting phase of the external assessment. In order to correctly interpret the findings of these surveys, a report is composed and hearings are organised (qualitative measures), fostering the correct interpretation of the quantitative findings.
- Stakeholders which have a smaller role in individual assessments but an overall interest in a good quality system of external reviews are probed for their experiences and suggestions for change through the various (formal and informal) meetings and contacts which are planned on a regular basis. Consultation with the NVAO happen on a regular basis (every 3 months). Each year a meeting with VVS, the Flemish Student Union is planned. The VLUHR QA Advisory Committee, with representatives of the institutions, VVS and social partners, meets at least 4 times a year. Review panels are probed for their satisfaction with the preparation and the conduct of the site visit, followed by hearings, fostering the correct interpretation of the quantitative findings.

#### Act

All feedback, gathered from the various instruments and engagements are gathered by the VLUHR QA IQA Working group and a plenary discussion is held at a general staff meeting. The conclusions from these discussions are laid down in the yearly action plan and discussed with the appropriate bodies (VLUHR QA Board and Advisory Committee). The final decisions are integrated in the internal roadmap. The implementation of the new procedures hence initiate the next cycle of internal quality assurance. Wherever possible and appropriate, minor changes to procedures are also made in the meantime and are laid down in the internal roadmap or other relevant documents.

### SO 2 - Communication of the results of assessments to stakeholders

The communication of the results of the external assessments of study programmes is stipulated in the Higher Education Codex<sup>12</sup>. The assessment reports are publicly available on the website of VLUHR QA. This was already the case since the start of the assessment rounds undertaken by VLIR and VLHORA. The review panels of VLIR and VLHORA were of the opinion that the reports were sometimes quite long and as such not written with a general public in mind. Furthermore, as study programmes are assessed in clusters, the time between an on-site visit and the actual publication of the report could be substantial. The information in the report might hence no longer completely reflect the current situation in the institutions.

These remarks are partly met in the new assessment round. The Higher Education Codex stipulates that the duration of the assessment of (a cluster of) study programmes is limited to 12 months, hence the information of the assessment reports better reflects the current situation in the institutions. Furthermore a summary of assessments reports is introduced.

<sup>12</sup> Higher Education Codex, Art.II.122

Follow up of the usefulness of the framework used for these summaries and exchange of experiences is scheduled for the staff meetings. Furthermore the satisfaction of the study programmes and the review panels concerning the summaries is surveyed in the questionnaires. The information value of the summaries is to be discussed in the annual meeting with VVS and with the VLUHR QA Advisory Committee, where VVS and the social partners are represented.

Communication is important to VLUHR QA and motivated the establishment of a permanent working group Marketing and Communication. With communication as a strategic goal, VLUHR QA emphasizes its importance for the organization. The operational goals related to communication and the yearly action plans assure that the goal is met. In 2014 VLUHR QA will develop a communication policy and will work specifically on the publication of assessment reports.

### **SO 3 - Staff policy and internal efficiency**

The procedures for the recruitment of new staff have been developed in spring 2013. Four new staff members have been hired based on these procedures. Staff members appreciate that they have been involved in the whole procedure. New staff members receive on-the-job training under the guidance of senior staff. New staff members get the opportunity to observe the main steps in the process, or a senior staff member/coordinator participates in meetings of the projects of new staff and gives feedback and guidance. Also a senior staff member/coordinator gives feedback on draft reports and is available for questions and reflection.

In line with the vision of VLUHR QA, competence management and a performance management review cycle are key in the personnel policy. The ambition is to develop the skills and talents of the staff and to use those in order to achieve the objectives of the organization. One of the conditions to implement competence management is the introduction of a performance management review cycle, including yearly planning and evaluation. In this review cycle the key question is whether tasks are implemented correctly and efficiently. Dialogue between staff and the director about results that need to be achieved (what), about knowledge, skills, attitude and behaviour (how) and about the support which is offered to achieve this, is important. Yearly evaluation and planning meetings with every staff member contribute to the continuous development of the staff, based on the Plan, Do, Check, Act approach. This policy is being developed in spring 2014 and will be implemented by the time of the site visit.

In order to excel in the core activities of VLUHR QA, the continuous development of the competences of all staff members is necessary. Based on the planning meetings with all staff members in spring 2014, a professional development policy will be developed in fall 2014, in order to create a clear framework for annual action plans for the professional development of staff members from 2015 on. As VLUHR QA didn't want to wait for the implementation of this systematic approach to start working on professional development of the staff, a first inventory has been made of the needs of staff members in order to start professional development activities for individual staff members and for the whole team. The main topics where staff members felt the need for professional development activities are theoretical frameworks for quality assurance, educational sciences, communication, process management and ICT skills.

For personal and professional development of staff, 21,000 euro per year is budgeted. The available budget for professional development is complemented with income from the active participation of staff members in external activities, such as ENQA peer reviews, European projects and presentations for other organizations.

#### **SO 4 and 5 - International involvement and knowledge sharing**

As indicated before, in the previous year VLUHR QA has primarily focused on the development of the organization and the implementation of the new assessment framework. The policy on international involvement and knowledge sharing is still under development.

In order to keep in touch with the international developments on the European level, staff members attend ENQA seminars. Wherever possible, staff members participate in international events which are in line with their duties within the organization. This guarantees that activities are developed in line with international developments and examples of good practise. Reports from international events are also gathered on a One Note page to be accessible for all staff. With the choice of expanding its international network and cooperation as the fourth strategic goal, VLUHR QA wants to play an active role. With the operational objectives related to the international dimension and the yearly action plans, VLUHR QA wants to contribute to this goal. In 2014 VLUHR QA will continue to follow international evolutions in quality assurance and aims to increase its visibility. It plans to have regular meetings with QA agencies working in the Netherlands and to explore the possibilities to conduct assessments in the Netherlands. A working group will be composed to start developing a more focused policy on internationalization.

Over the years, the staff members of VLUHR QA gathered a lot of experience in the field of quality assurance in higher education. With the fifth strategic goal VLUHR QA expresses its ambition to disseminate that expertise to support our stakeholders and society at large. Until now VLUHR QA has mainly responded to demands of institutions or organizations but it wants to take up a more pro-active role. Plans to reconsider the event linked to the publication of assessment reports (see above) and turn it into a more meaningful exchange of knowledge, experiences and ideas on quality assurance with and between higher education institutions support this ambition. Furthermore, in 2014 the focus will be mainly on developing a vision on how expertise could be further developed and shared. The PDCA-cycle with operational goals and yearly action plans assures the quality of the work on international involvement and knowledge sharing. More specific measures will be implemented to guarantee the quality of those domains.

## **2.7 SWOT**

The self-evaluation process undertaken by VLUHR QA has been useful as a preparation for the external peer review and as an element in the continuous improvement of the performance of VLUHR QA, but it has also been useful as a frame for the integration process of the quality assurance units of VLIR and VLHORA into VLUHR QA. As a conclusion of this analysis, VLUHR QA points out the following strengths, areas for improvement and threats and opportunities, based on the situation on 15th March 2014:

### Strengths

- The official status of VLUHR QA is strongly embedded in the Higher Education Codex and recognised by higher education institutions.
- VLUHR QA and its predecessors VLIR and VLHORA have strongly contributed to the development and importance of quality assurance in higher education in Flanders. It builds upon the extensive experience of VLIR and VLHORA in the field of external quality assurance since 1991. The integration of the two quality assurance units brought together extensive experience with universities and university colleges.
- The role of VLUHR QA in a three-layered system with a clear responsibility for internal quality assurance within higher education institutions; external study programme assessment by VLUHR QA (which balances independence and ownership); and the independent accreditation by NVAO.
- The new assessment and accreditation framework has been developed together with the higher education institutions and NVAO. Focus groups with panel members and representatives from study programmes and higher education institutions indicate that the new assessment approach is in general received positively because it allows to focus on the core of teaching and learning processes within each study programme. The system is based on a self-evaluation process – site visit – public report – independent accreditation approach. A follow-up procedure is in place for programmes which receive a (partially) negative assessment.
- Although the working method with parallel panels for bigger clusters needs optimization, the clustered assessment of study programmes in the same field is generally seen as a strength of the Flemish system and contributes to the consistency in decision making.
- The new structure of VLUHR QA as an independent entity within VLUHR and with its own Quality Assurance Board, offers an answer to the main critique about a lack of independence as was formulated by the peer review panels that evaluated VLIR and VLHORA in 2008 and 2009. The VLUHR QA Board consists of independent national and international quality assurance experts.
- VLUHR QA has developed a clear longer-term mission and vision statement, strategic and operational objectives and an annual action plan for 2014.
- The VLUHR QA staff are highly skilled, have experience and expertise. They offer good support and the content of the guidance provided to peer review panels is strongly appreciated. There is an attitude of professionalism, encompassing energy, flexibility and mutual support.
- The constructive cooperation with the accreditation body NVAO, the students union VVS and the Flemish Government.
- A national and international network is in place. VLUHR QA expertise is recognised within ENQA and international projects.
- The information provided to study programmes and panel members about the processes related to study programme assessments is clear and well appreciated. The 'Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education' is a useful tool, both for study programmes and panel members.
- The implementation of the new assessment procedures has been closely monitored. The VLUHR QA Advisory Committee offers institutions a structural place to give feedback on the procedures. Electronic surveys are sent to all assessed study programmes and higher education institutions and to all panel members. In order to interpret the results of these surveys, focus group discussions have been organised regularly.

### Areas for improvement

- The more independent role which VLUHR QA plays vis à vis the higher education institutions, in combination with the newly established procedures, sometimes leads to tensions with higher education institutions when they compare with the previous situation during which they perceived a closer relationship with the quality assurance units.
- Pressure on the budget has led to a reduction in the length of site visits, the number of panel members and the available staff. It is difficult for panels to gather all necessary information during visits where one programme is assessed and the site visit lasts only one and a half day as well as during site visits of complex study programmes with many variants. For study programmes with a complex structure or an interdisciplinary approach the reduced number of panel members makes it difficult to gather all necessary competences in a peer review panel. Staff are facing large volumes of work, making it difficult to cope with unexpected additional tasks and to invest in professional development.
- External quality assurance is seen by higher education institutions as (too) expensive. VLUHR QA needs to further develop its profile to show it adds value for the quality of higher education in Flanders, both within the VLUHR as umbrella organization and within society.
- Although much time and energy have been invested in developing clear internal procedures, identical interpretation of every step of internal procedures has not always been achieved yet. Intersession during team meetings should further improve the consistency in the use of internal procedures. Procedures for exceptional cases (interuniversity programmes, procedures in English, follow-up of appeals procedures, ...) are still under development. The aim is to finalise the development of these procedures by fall 2014.
- With the introduction of an executive summary of each assessment report for students and the broader society, a first important step had been taken to further disclose the results of assessment reports, next to the involved study programmes and NVAO. Nevertheless, VLUHR QA sees opportunities to broader communicate those executive summaries and other useful knowledge about the Flemish higher education as a way forward to better serve the needs of (future) students, higher education institutions and society.
- Although the VLUHR Board has reached an agreement on the formal transfer of VLIR and VLHORA quality assurance staff to VLUHR in order to create a unified personnel policy, this process hasn't been completed yet at the time of writing this self-evaluation report.
- Clear internal guidelines and consistent application of internal guidelines are necessary in order to improve internal data management. Implementation of Groupware software is considered as a potential way forward, but has not been a priority until now.

### Opportunities and threats

- Higher education institutions in Flanders are pleading for an external quality assurance system, uniquely based on institutional accreditation, leaving out study programme assessments. This would have a major impact on the role and functions of VLUHR QA. Therefore VLUHR QA wants to raise its profile as high quality assurance agency in order to stay an interesting partner for higher education institutions. Additionally VLUHR QA aims to diversify its activities.
- Higher education institutions are continuously developing their internal quality procedures. The expertise and experience of VLUHR QA could provide useful support to them in this area. However, although VLUHR QA explicitly aims at both accountability and quality improvement, it is often perceived as focusing mainly on accountability and thus less seen as a partner in quality improvement and the development of a quality culture.
- The pressure on financial resources of higher education institutions also puts pressure on the budget of VLUHR QA.







## **PART 2**

The ENQA membership criteria



## INTRODUCTION

For the benefit of the Panel, the ENQA membership criteria are listed and a succinct summary is given of those elements via which VLUHR QA believes it meets the standard in question.

It is necessary to demonstrate that the VLUHR QA especially satisfies the standards from the third part of the ESG (Part 3: 'European Standards and guidelines for external quality assurance agencies'). As this third part also includes the second part of the ESG (Part 2 'European Standards and guidelines for external quality assurance of higher institutions'), which in turn includes the first part of the ESG (Part 1 'European Standards and Guidelines for internal quality assurance within higher education institutions'), all standards from the ESG are discussed below.

### ENQA CRITERION 1 ESG 3.1 EN 3.3

#### ESG 3.1 Use of external quality assurance procedures for higher education

*The external quality assurance of agencies should take into account the presence and effectiveness of the external quality assurance processes described in Part 2 of the European Standards and Guidelines.*

VLUHR QA's quality assurance procedures, processes and guidelines take into account the ESG. Based on the conclusions on the compliance with the individual standards in ESG Part 2 (see below), VLUHR QA believes that it complies with ESG 3.1.

#### ESG 3.3 Activities

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

VLUHR QA's activities cover most external quality assurance and enhancement aspects of higher education at study programme level. Furthermore, the main activity is the organization of external study programme assessments. All Flemish external review activities are undertaken on a regular and cyclical basis. Other assessment activities are undertaken in accordance with the relevant procedures.

In the period 2004-2012 VLIR organised 66 clustered assessments, involving 601 study programmes. VLHORA organised 90 external assessments, involving 546 study programmes. In the current cycle (2013-2020), VLUHR QA will organise at least 114 clustered assessments, involving 987 study programmes. The overview of all assessments will be available during the site visit.

## ESG 2.1 USE OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCEDURES

*External quality assurance procedures should take into account the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines.*

The assessment framework VLUHR QA uses, pays attention to the internal quality assurance procedures of the higher education institutions. Below is outlined how the ESG are taken into account in the assessment framework. The accreditation system which is in place since 2013 clearly aims to encourage the development of quality assurance and of a quality culture within each study programme and higher education institution.

### ESG 1.1 Policy and procedures for quality assurance

*Institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards. They should also commit themselves explicitly to the development of a culture which recognises the importance of quality, and quality assurance, in their work. To achieve this, institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality. The strategy, policy and procedures should have a formal status and be publicly available. They should also include a role for students and other stakeholders.*

The current external quality assurance system is based on the principle that the institutions themselves are responsible for – and permanently monitor – the quality of their educational activities (Higher Education Codex, Art.II.122). The activities in the context of the external assessment by VLUHR QA thus build on the self-evaluation carried out by the study programmes in question.

In order to better guarantee the systematic assessment of the policy and procedures for quality assurance within higher education institutions, the Flemish Government decided to oblige every institution to undergo institutional reviews. NVAO (the Accreditation Organization for the Netherlands and Flanders) organises the institutional reviews for Flemish higher education institutions. A potential role for VLUHR QA in these institutional reviews is still under discussion. For institutions which are subject to an institutional review, the external study programme assessment focusses on the results of quality assurance processes, rather than on quality assurance procedures themselves. The assessments focus on the quality of objectives, educational processes and achieved outcomes. While assessing the educational process, the improvement measures carried out by quality assurance at programme level are taken into account, including follow-up of the previous assessment.

The assessment framework used by VLUHR QA includes an extra generic quality standard for institutions which are not subject to institutional review (Registered institutions). This fourth standard focusses on 'Structure and organization of internal quality assurance'.

Although VLUHR QA itself doesn't always systematically analyse the quality assurance policy and procedures, this standard guarantees that the quality assurance policy and procedures are assessed periodically in a systematic way in cases where the institution doesn't take part in an institutional review. This way, guarantees are in place that every institution is assessed periodically on its quality assurance policies and procedures.

### **ESG 1.2 Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards**

*Institutions should have formal mechanisms for the approval, periodic review and monitoring of their programmes and awards.*

External approval and periodic review is guaranteed through external study programme assessments by VLUHR QA and accreditation by NVAO. Internal monitoring and periodic review is explicitly evaluated within the VLUHR QA assessment framework.

- Development and publication of intended learning outcomes and the involvement of employers and society in the development of these learning outcomes are the core of generic quality standard 1.
- Generic quality standard 2 takes into account curriculum development with the participation of stakeholders, delivery of the curriculum, availability of appropriate learning resources and monitoring of the progress and achievements of students.
- Furthermore, within generic quality standard 2, the follow-up of the suggestions of the previous external assessment is assessed explicitly.

Furthermore, the institutional reviews organised by NVAO focus mainly on the quality of the educational policy pursued by an institution. Each higher education institution has a department which supports its study programmes in the development of its quality assurance. Often institution-wide internal quality assurance policies are in place which are assessed during the institutional review.

### **ESG 1.3 Assessment of students**

*Students should be assessed using published criteria, regulations and procedures which are applied consistently.*

In the new quality assurance cycle (since 2013) assessment of students has become one of the most important elements of the external assessment framework. The third generic quality standard focusses fully on the assessment of students and the achievement of the intended learning outcomes and other study programme objectives. The assessments of students have to be valid, reliable and transparent. Also the organization of evaluations, evaluation approaches, used criteria, transparency and quality monitoring of the testing system need to be assessed. This assessment is based on the policies developed by the study programme and on the screening of recent exams and, where relevant, bachelor's and master's theses and internship reports.

### **ESG 1.4 Quality assurance of teaching staff**

*Institutions should have ways of satisfying themselves that staff involved with the teaching of students are qualified and competent to do so. They should be available to those undertaking external reviews, and commented upon in reports.*

The (monitoring of the) quality of the staff (including staff policy and the impact of subject-related, educational and teaching qualities in the recruitment, promotion, evaluation and monitoring of staff, teaching staff evaluations) is explicitly considered under generic quality standard 2.

### **ESG 1.5 Learning resources and student support**

*Institutions should ensure that the resources available for the support of student learning are adequate and appropriate for each programme offered.*

Services – both physical facilities and tutoring provision – are explicitly considered under generic quality standard 2. The quality of learning resources is also explicitly considered under the same generic quality standard.

### **ESG 1.6 Information systems**

*Institutions should ensure that they collect, analysis and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes of study and other activities.*

Collection, analysis and use of relevant information on educational activities by the institutions is evaluated under the three generic quality standards:

- The gathering of information on student progression and success rates are considered under generic quality standards 2 and 3.
- The employability of graduates is an element of the evaluation of generic quality standard 3.
- Students' satisfaction with their study programmes is linked to the different aspects considered under generic quality standards 1, 2 and 3.
- Effectiveness of teachers and the availability of learning resources are evaluated under generic quality standard 2.
- The profile of student populations and the institution's own key performance indicators are assessed under generic quality standards 2 and 3.

### **ESG 1.7 Public information**

*Institutions should regularly publish up to date, impartial and objective information, both quantitative and qualitative, about the programmes and awards they are offering.*

The choice made jointly by the institutions and VLUHR QA to publish the reports of the assessment panels, before an accreditation decision is taken by NVAO, is motivated by a concern to publish information gathered in connection with the assessment within a reasonable timeframe.

The familiarity of all stakeholders with the objectives of the programme is considered under generic quality standard 1. Information provision and external communication are explicitly considered under generic quality standard 2 and the familiarity with the evaluation procedures is considered under generic quality standard 3.

### **Conclusion**

VLUHR QA is convinced that its approach pays considerable attention to the development of internal quality assurance procedures within higher education institutions and that it therefore complies with ESG 2.1.



## ESG 2.2 DEVELOPMENT OF EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESSES

*The aims and objectives of quality assurance processes should be determined before the processes themselves are developed, by all those responsible (including higher education institutions) and should be published with a description of the procedures to be used.*

The general aims and objectives of quality assurance processes are determined by the Flemish Government. Within the legal framework and the accreditation framework which has been established by NVAO, VLUHR QA has further developed the system, focussing on the design of procedures which are fit for purpose for the Flemish Higher Education institutions. As on the one hand extensive consultations on the system had been organised by the Government and NVAO, and on the other hand the freedom for VLUHR QA to design the system was mainly on a practical and procedural level, VLUHR QA decided to focus on the involvement of higher education institutions and to a lesser extent students when developing the Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education. Institutions were actively involved through a working group on the new accreditation system. Students were consulted in bilateral meetings and through their presence in several working groups. Employers were invited to join the VLUHR QA Board, but didn't accept the invitation.

The main aim and primary objective of VLUHR QA is the monitoring and promotion of quality and quality culture in Flemish higher education (see also 2.3 Mission – vision – strategy). This objective is always present in the devised procedures and processes.

The Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education sets out the conditions for carrying out study programme assessments. This is the main document to inform institutions and panels about the process. The following objectives of the external quality assurance system are identified in the manual:

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

These objectives are explicitly mentioned in the task description of every assessment panel (Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education, chapter 3.3) as follows. “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 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.”

The Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education does not only contain the objectives of the system, but also contains explicit and detailed descriptions of all procedures used during the external quality assurance process. This document is available in printed form, and can also be consulted on the VLUHR QA website. This guide has been developed in consultation with the higher education institutions and brought into use in 2013. The guide has also been endorsed by NVAO and is in line with their (overarching) accreditation framework.

### ESG 2.3 CRITERIA FOR DECISIONS

*Any formal decisions made as a result of an external quality assurance activity should be based on explicit published criteria that are applied consistently.*

Within the new accreditation framework a choice has been made for three generic quality standards. For each generic quality standard evaluation criteria have been defined, but it was a clear ambition to keep the standards generic and to allow study programmes to tell their own story. Experiences with this open assessment frameworks learn that it doesn't only give the programme more opportunities to tell their own story, but that it also gives the panels more room for interpretation of the assessment criteria. Although most study programmes find the openness of the assessment framework positive, remarks are made that this openness reduces to a certain extent the comparability of assessment reports, mainly between assessment panels.

Nevertheless, VLUHR QA is convinced that there are enough safeguards in place to guarantee consistency in decision making. For each generic quality standard the panel has to express a considered and substantiated opinion. The opinions are supported by facts and analyses and make use of illustrative examples where possible. The panel must make clear how it has reached its opinion, taking into account the (criteria of the) generic quality standard. In doing this the panel takes into account the follow-up of the recommendations of the previous assessment panel and the programme's future plans. Per generic quality standard clear evaluation criteria are formulated to guide the assessment panels in their judgement. For scoring ('unsatisfactory', 'satisfactory', 'good' and 'excellent') criteria and decision-making rules are also determined and published ('Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education', chapter 3.3.1). The panel also expresses a final opinion on the quality of the study programme as a whole, according to the same four-point scale. The VLUHR QA project manager plays an important role as a guardian of the procedures and criteria for decisions.

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

- Working with a project manager per assessment, who often also acts as the assessment panel's secretary. The project manager informs the assessment panel about the criteria and decision making rules during the inaugurate meeting and monitors them during the consultations and the compilation of the report.
- The use of the detailed Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education.
- The organization of assessments in clusters, as a result of which the assessment panel is required to present its findings comparatively, firstly in the form of comparative descriptions, and secondly in comparative tables in which the score is indicated per theme.
- Per field of studies, a validated discipline-specific learning outcomes framework is established by the involved study programmes. The panel evaluates each study programme against this framework.
- Draft study programme reports are read by other VLUHR QA staff members for consistency of judgement.
- Frequent staff meetings where issues regarding the assessment of study programmes are discussed.

Both the draft study programme report and the draft comparative section are sent to the study programme for reaction. The panel decides whether or not it takes into account the study programmes' remarks, but the panel has to explain why it does so.

Strictly speaking, VLUHR QA does not take any *formal* decisions about the results (the assessment reports) of its external quality assurance activity. This power lies with NVAO, which takes formal accreditation decisions. NVAO independently checks whether the judgments in the VLUHR QA reports are based on the published criteria and are applied consistently. If NVAO finds this is not the case, NVAO can request additional information from the assessment panel or even request an additional assessment. The system with an external panel of peers which reviews each study programme and the independent check of NVAO afterwards guarantee a consistent implementation of the procedures and criteria.

#### ESG 2.4 PROCESSES FIT FOR PURPOSE

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

As mentioned under ESG 2.2, the main aim and primary objective of VLUHR QA (quality monitoring and promotion) is always present in the devised procedures and processes. The task definition of the assessment panels and the structure of the assessment framework and reports, in all of which a clear place is given to quality assurance and enhancement, are explicit examples.

Within the quality assurance system, a single fixed assessment framework is used which applies to all study programmes. The procedures and processes which are used and described in the guide likewise apply equally to all study programmes. However, three elements in the assessment process help ensure the fitness of the general procedures to the individual characteristics of the study programmes:

- For each assessment, the involved study programmes formulate a discipline-specific learning outcomes framework which forms the basis for the assessment. This framework has to be validated by NVAO.
- An information session at the beginning of every project is the moment at which the individual nature of the study programmes is discussed. Among other things, this covers arrangements about the language of the assessment and assessment report, the involvement of the professional field in the assessment interviews, and the information to be supplied, e.g. data about research output, professional involvement.
- The study programmes are evaluated by peers. The study programmes have a say in the first phase of the assessment panel selection. They suggest names of panel members with domain and educational expertise, audit and quality assurance expertise, international expertise and experts with knowledge of the national educational system. VLUHR QA also pays due regard to the criteria on independence, expertise and authority in the selection of the assessment panels. A student-member is selected by VVS, the Flemish student union. The VLUHR QA Board has to agree upon every proposal for the composition of a panel before panel members are invited. As soon as the panel is complete, NVAO gives an advice on the composition of the panel.
- For every panel an inaugurate meeting is organised, where panel members are informed about and trained for the assessment process. During this meeting they are informed about Flemish higher education and where relevant of the specificity of the study programmes under review.

In order to make the process more fit for purpose, in the new assessment cycle (since 2013), institutional policies on quality assurance and study programme specific policies are separately assessed. Institutional reviews are introduced to assess the institutional policies and procedures for quality assurance, in order to reduce the burden of study programme assessments. Previously, those procedures had to be discussed within every study programme assessment. Now they are assessed once at the institutional level. This in addition allows to focus study programme assessment more on the core teaching process (objectives, curriculum, teaching staff, study programme specific facilities and achieved learning outcomes). This new approach should further increase the fitness for purpose of the external assessment process.

For bachelor's and master's programmes the NVAO assessment framework is regulated quite strictly. Wherever VLUHR QA has more flexibility in defining the procedures, it uses the opportunity to make the framework more fit for purpose. E.g. the external assessment of the Flemish post-graduate teacher education programmes, which VLUHR QA organised in 2011-2012, offered the opportunity to adapt the assessment framework to those study programmes to make it more fit for purpose.

## ESG 2.5 REPORTING

*Reports should be published and should be written in a style which is clear and readily accessible to its intended readership. Any decisions, commendations or recommendations contained in reports should be easy for a reader to find.*

VLUHR QA believes the results of study programme assessments could be useful for a broad readership: the study programmes themselves, NVAO, the Government, students, parents and employers.

The full reports have as main intended readership the study programmes and NVAO. Study programme management and staff should understand the assessment by the panel and get suggestions for further improvement. The structure and content of the reports follow the generic quality standards from the assessment framework and are thus set. The style and tone of the reports vary, reflecting the individual characteristics of the assessment panels, but should always be direct and transparent. At the end of each study programme report a summary of the suggestions for improvement is published to facilitate the follow-up. NVAO needs in the first place transparent judgements and clear justifications for these judgements. They indicated in recent meetings that they are willing to accept less dry jargon.

Although VLUHR QA invested in writing accessible reports for a broader readership, it proves very difficult to fit both the needs of NVAO and the study programmes as well as students, parents and employers. Although the new assessment framework leaves more space to bring the story of a study programme than the previous framework which had 21 aspects to be evaluated separately, VLUHR QA has searched for additional measures to make the results of study programme assessments accessible for a broader readership. In line with the suggestion VLHORA got from the previous peer review panel, a separate executive summary has been introduced for every study programme report, focusing on the information needs of students, parents and to a certain extent also employers. This summary gives insight in the profile of the programme, the educational approach, the facilities provided to students, information about the labour market position of alumni and the achieved learning outcomes.

All assessment reports and executive summaries are available on the VLUHR QA website from the day of their formal handover. Printed copies may be purchased. A few days before the handover, a press release, in some cases with a copy of the report, is sent to a number of journalists under embargo.

## ESG 2.6 FOLLOW-UP PROCEDURES

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

The Flemish Government, the higher education institutions and VLUHR QA all fully agree that follow-up of external assessments is crucial to guarantee continuous quality improvement. Therefore, a clear division of tasks is defined by the Flemish Government (Higher Education Codex Art. II.122). Institutions are responsible for their internal quality assurance processes, including the follow-up of external quality assurance. Most institutions request that each study programme reports within a year after an external assessment on how it is following up the suggestions for improvement. Also afterwards, quality assurance departments within the institutions follow-up how the study programmes integrate suggestions for improvement from peer review panels in their programme. Several institutions plan mid-term assessments between two external assessments. Furthermore, institutions have to report annually to the Flemish Government in their annual report on how they follow up external assessments. In the framework of institutional audits, NVAO checks internal quality assurance procedures, including how the institution guarantees the follow-up of external quality assurance. VLIR and VLHORA discussed in 2009 with representatives from the higher education institutions whether additional follow-up measures would be useful. In both cases the institutions clearly indicated that they don't see a need for additional follow-up.

The legal framework limits the role of VLUHR QA to the external assessments, organised every 8 years. Within this framework, VLUHR QA has developed several measures to make sure that institutions follow up the suggestions for improvement which the external peer review panels formulate. VLUHR QA:

- Summarises all suggestions for improvement at the end of each study programme report, to offer a tool to monitor follow-up.
- Study programmes get the opportunity to react on their concept study programme report. In case they describe improvement measures which they have taken, this is signalled at the end of the study programme report.
- Each study programme is requested to report in its next self-evaluation report in detail about the follow-up of all suggestions for improvement. Since 2013, this overview is an obligatory annex to the report.

In case of a negative score on a generic quality standard, NVAO grants only a temporary accreditation for a maximum of 3 years. This temporary accreditation is based on an improvement plan developed by the programme. At the end of the temporary accreditation an external peer review panel has to assess the achieved improvement.

The previous peer review panel suggested VLHORA to analyse the annual reports higher education institutions submit to the Flemish Government. Based on an analysis of the publicly available annual reports, it is clear that institutions report on the follow-up of assessments, but the level of detail doesn't allow for a useful analysis on study programme level for VLUHR QA.

## ESG 2.7 PERIODIC REVIEWS

*External quality assurance of institutions and/or programmes should be undertaken on a cyclical basis. The length of the cycle and the review procedures to be used should be clearly defined and published in advance.*

Since the start, external study programme assessments have been done on a cyclical basis. Accreditation is generally awarded for 8 years. As study programme assessment reports are used to request for accreditation, these assessments are also planned in cycles of eight years. The deadlines (report publication date, accreditation application date and transitional accreditation expiry date) are clearly communicated to the study programmes and are defined at the beginning of every eight-yearly cycle. Next to the overview made by VLUHR QA, also the Higher Education Register includes the accreditation terms for every programme. The procedures used for the external assessments are described in the Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education, and are publicly available (see ESG 2.2).

The length of the cycle is chosen based on the belief that study programmes should have enough time to implement structural improvements based on the panel's suggestions and document the results of these improvements in their next self-evaluation report.

## ESG 2.8 SYSTEM-WIDE ANALYSES

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

Although the Flemish Government chooses to organise system-wide analyses itself<sup>13</sup>, VLUHR QA takes several initiatives to comply with this Standard.

Study programme assessments are clustered where possible. In every report of a clustered assessment, a separate chapter describes the comparative analysis of the assessed programmes. In case parallel panels assess study programmes in the same field, they each make a comparison of the study programmes they assess. Although officially not required, VLUHR QA strongly advises review panels to include a policy oriented chapter in the report. This has become prevalent in the last years, especially when dealing with clustered assessments.

On a system-level, VLUHR QA writes and presents occasionally papers in which it analyses aspects of the quality assurance system on a system-wide level.

VLUHR QA created a working group to analyse options to further disclose the results of external assessments. Next to initiatives to disclose the individual reports better, also an analysis of both suggestions for improvement and best practices is planned. Suggestions for improvement have always been summarised in the reports. Best practices will be described and recorded in a database to make them more accessible for further system-wide analyses. The development of this database is part of the VLUHR QA action plan for 2014.

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<sup>13</sup> Higher Education Codex, Art. II.169 The Flemish Government makes at least every 5 years a comparative analysis of the study programme assessment reports and accreditation reports, as well as system-wide analyses on the basis of those reports.

## ENQA CRITERION 2 ESG 3.2 OFFICIAL STATUS

*Agencies should be formally recognised by competent public authorities in the European Higher Education Area as agencies with responsibilities for external quality assurance and should have an established legal basis. They should comply with any requirements of the legislative jurisdictions within which they operate.*

The roles and responsibilities of VLUHR with respect to the coordination of external assessments are established by decree (Higher Education Codex, Art. II.122 §3) and in the VLUHR Statutes. More information on how VLUHR QA was established and took over responsibilities from the VLIR and VLHORA quality assurance units can be found under 2.1 *History of the agency*. Next to the formal, legal recognition, the accreditation body NVAO also endorses the Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education, which is devised by VLUHR QA.

## ENQA CRITERION 3 ESG 3.4: RESOURCES

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

VLUHR QA is mainly funded by the Flemish higher education institutions, which is a deliberate choice of the Flemish Government. The Government sees quality assurance as well as its funding as a responsibility of the higher education institutions. This approach creates a dependency relation between VLUHR QA and the institutions. Under ESG 3.6 'Independence', the measures taken to prevent that these dependencies have an impact on the process or the outcomes of external assessments are set out. Next to the incomes from higher education institutions, smaller amounts are earned by participation in (international) projects.

The available budget described under 2.1 *History of the Agency* is sufficient to hire the staff necessary to organise the external assessments. However, it does not offer much space for developing extra activities, such as expertise development and sharing of good practices among institutions. Under pressure of higher education institutions, which see an impact of Government budget cuts on their own budgets, the budgets for external assessments have been reduced to a level that challenges the high quality VLUHR QA aims for. The number of panel members has been reduced as well as the length of site visits. Based on the evaluation of the workload mentioned under 2.2 *Structure and resources* and the feedback of the first assessments within the new accreditation system, VLUHR QA will evaluate the current budget in fall 2014.

## ENQA CRITERION 4 ESG 3.5: MISSION STATEMENT

*Agencies should have clear and explicit goals and objectives for their work, contained in a publicly available statement.*

As indicated under 2.3 *Mission – vision – strategy*, VLUHR QA has developed a mission and vision statement that holds explicit and clear goals and objectives as part of a broader strategic exercise to define the profile and the ambitions of VLUHR QA. A bottom-up development process has led to the mission statement as it stands. A working group consisting of staff members drafted several proposals and several follow-up meetings were held with the whole quality assurance team. Based on this exercise, the management team subsequently finalised the mission and vision statement. These statements have been discussed with the VLUHR QA Board and the VLUHR QA Advisory Committee. The final statement is available on the VLUHR QA website.

As soon as the mission and vision statement were finalised internally, strategic and operational objectives of VLUHR QA have been developed under the guidance of an external consultant.

## ENQA CRITERION 5 ESG 3.6: INDEPENDENCE

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

VLUHR QA sees different types of independence. As stated in the ESG, 'autonomy in operations' is important, which can be divided in organizational, operational and financial independence. Furthermore, the autonomy of peer review panels to come to conclusions is crucial in external quality assurance.

Entire independence from all stakeholders, including institutions and the government, at all levels is impossible. Therefore VLUHR QA prefers the concept of balancing dependencies in order to deliver objective and well informed results and ownership within the institutions for the processes and the results of external quality assurance.

In line with the suggestions of the previous ENQA peer reviews of VLIR and VLHORA, additional guarantees for operational independence have been implemented within VLUHR. VLUHR QA is convinced that the current structure offers a good balance between independence and ownership of the higher education institutions.

### **Autonomous responsibility for operations**

#### **1 Organizational independence**

The Flemish Government creates the legal framework for the assessments organised by VLUHR QA, but does not have any formal link with the organization.

The VLUHR Board, which is composed of representatives of higher education institutions, limits itself to long term financial and strategic decisions on quality assurance. In line with the suggestions of the former peer review panels which evaluated VLIR and VLHORA, an own VLUHR QA Board has been established for VLUHR QA. Evaluation activities are the sole responsibility of the VLUHR QA Board and are thus fully separated from the VLUHR governance structure.

At the moment of writing this report, most of the staff is still officially employed by VLIR or VLHORA. In February 2014, the VLUHR board has decided to take over all VLUHR QA staff members. An independent personnel policy will be developed for VLUHR QA in the course of the year 2014.

#### **2 Operational independence**

The VLUHR QA Board guarantees the operational independence of VLUHR QA. It guides VLUHR QA and ratifies the proposals for composition of all assessment panels. The division of labour between the VLUHR Board and the VLUHR QA Board is stated in a Governance Structure document (see Annex 2).



### 3 Financial independence

The Flemish Government does not fund any activity of VLUHR QA. It sees the financing of external quality assurance as a sole responsibility of the higher education institutions. So, the financial independence from the Government is clearly guaranteed.

The higher education institutions pay for the general budget of VLUHR QA and for the external assessments they receive. VLUHR QA invoices on the basis of real expenses. The cost per assessment is based on several characteristics of the assessment and is budgeted at the beginning of the assessment cycle. A general agreement on the cost for the whole assessment cycle is signed with the involved institutions.

Within VLUHR, VLUHR QA has a separate budget, in order to keep finances clearly separated.

#### **Independent assessments**

Panels of independent peers are responsible for the assessments. Each panel is supported by a VLUHR QA staff member who is trained to be a neutral project manager during the whole assessment process. Each panel is fully independent within the operational framework of the Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education. The panel consults all relevant stakeholders (staff, students, alumni and employers) during the assessment visit to the programme, but is fully autonomous in the formulation of its conclusions and recommendations.

To ensure the independency of the assessment panels, safeguards are built into the entire composition procedure:

- The study programmes under evaluation are only involved in the first phase of the composition of the panel: they suggest candidate panel members and draw up a proposal for panel chairs.
- The chairperson can propose extra candidate panel members.
- The VLUHR QA Board has to confirm every proposal for the composition of a panel.
- Incompatibility grounds are defined.
- Candidate panel members are required to sign a statement of independence as a precondition for joining the panel. At the end of the assessment process, the panel members have to sign their statement of independence again, and have to declare that they have carried out the assessment in complete independence.
- Before the panel can officially start its work, its independence is again checked by NVAO.

A detailed description can be found in the Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education.

## **ENQA CRITERION 6 ESG 3.7: EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE CRITERIA AND PROCESSES USED BY THE MEMBERS**

The processes, criteria and procedures used by agencies should be pre-defined and publicly available. These processes will normally be expected to include:

- a self-assessment or equivalent procedure by the subject of the quality assurance process;
- an external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate, (a) student member(s), and site visits as decided by the agency;
- publication of a report, including any decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes;
- a follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report.

Processes, criteria and procedures are described in the Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education, which is publicly available. Information about the various steps and procedures in the process is also given to the study programme coordinators during the workshop and to the assessment panels during the inaugurate meeting.

The first three steps mentioned in the Standard (self-assessment/external assessment by a group of experts including a student member/publication of the report & formal accreditation) are constituent elements of the current external quality assurance system. On follow-up, reference can be made to ESG 2.6.

Due to budgetary limitations and on the request of higher education institutions, reports are published on paper only via print-on-demand since the beginning of 2014. The reports are published on the VLUHR QA website and can be ordered via print-on-demand.

## **ENQA CRITERION 7 ESG 3.8: ACCOUNTABILITY PROCEDURES**

Agencies should have in place procedures for their own accountability.

### **Published policy**

VLUHR QA is accountable for its actions and operations and safeguards the quality of its actions in various manners. VLUHR QA operates according to the assignment laid down in the Higher Education Codex and in line with the accreditation framework established by NVAO.

Following its establishment as a new organization VLUHR QA has developed its internal quality assurance system. A description of this system is available at the VLUHR QA website. A quality handbook has been developed to present the internal quality assurance procedures in a coherent way. This handbook will be available during the site visit.

In its mission statement VLUHR QA describes its ambition with respect to fostering a quality culture in higher education. To do so, stakeholder involvement is crucial to VLUHR QA. This is reflected in the vision statement VLUHR QA has adopted. An overview of the relevant stakeholders and the way they are involved in the VLUHR QA internal quality assurance (IQA) system can be found under 2.6 Internal QA.

The IQA policy should be ratified by the VLUHR QA Board and will be discussed with the VLUHR QA Advisory Committee, prior to its publication on the VLUHR QA website. The revision of this policy is aligned with the evaluation of the strategic and operational objectives of VLUHR QA.

The publicly available 'Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education' describes the procedures related to the assessment of study programmes. It has been designed in close consultation with delegations of the Ministry of Education in Flanders and with (delegations of) the higher education institutions in Flanders. Finally the 'Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education' has been endorsed by the NVAO. Consequently, VLUHR QA is able to guarantee that it conducts the educational assessments in a systematic, transparent manner, offering all stakeholders opportunities to provide VLUHR QA with feedback on its functioning and its procedures, and therefore steering towards quality improvement.

#### **Processes in line with the mission**

Based on its mission and vision VLUHR QA established in early 2014 for the first time an action plan. As described under 2.6 *Internal Quality Assurance*, VLUHR QA has the ambition to work more systematically with yearly action plans, based on input from all stakeholders and evaluations of its realisations, challenges and achievements. In this manner the team stays focused and frequently revises the implementation of VLUHR QA aims and objectives and discusses whether its actions are still in line with its mission and goals of quality assurance.

#### **No-conflict-of-interest mechanism in the work of its external experts**

In its operations a balance is found between independence and expertise of the panel members and the ownership and involvement of the higher education institutions.

- With respect to peer review panel members, independence from the higher education institutions, the institutions are asked to signal relationships and links with the proposed candidates. The panel members sign the declaration of independence or a no-conflict of interest testimony, upon acceptance of the membership of the expert panel. Proposals of panel members are searched for relations with the institutions under evaluation by the project managers of VLUHR QA.
- The expertise of the expert panels in terms of discipline related expertise and labour market expertise, audit expertise, international expertise, educational expertise and the student perspective is safeguarded by the profiles of the experts, who are brought together in the peer review panels.
- The final composition of the panels is double-checked by the accreditation body (NVAO) for criteria of independence and expertise. In case of possible relationships, an additional screening is conducted before a final decision is taken about the acceptance of the expert in the panel.

#### **Subcontractors**

The only subcontracting VLUHR QA uses is the lay-outing of the assessment reports. Regular meetings with the company doing the lay-out should make sure that the lay-out work is done as expected.

VLHORA previously worked with external secretaries for programme assessments. In the new assessment round, however, it has been decided to change the policy and to work only with staff members as project leaders and secretaries; hence this allows a better quality control.

### Internal quality assurance policies

VLUHR QA's quality assurance is structurally embedded in its organization structures as well as in its functioning. The IQA policy describes the internal quality assurance policy and addresses the cyclic process for quality control and quality assurance. The IQA policy has been described in detail under 2.6 Internal quality assurance.

For study programme assessments the following measures are implemented:

- VLUHR QA conducts the educational assessments according to the 'Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education'. In managing the projects all staff members use this 'protocol' and roadmap, which contributes to the consistency in which projects are run. In 2013 differences in implementation resulted from the late formal approval of the accreditation framework and, consequently, the late development of internal procedures.
- Quality assurance is a regular topic at team meetings, meetings of the management team, the IQA working group and the VLUHR QA Advisory Committee.
- Stakeholders are surveyed for their remarks and suggestions for improvement of the system. Stakeholders have a voice in the evaluation of how the review process is being conducted and has been perceived by the panels, the higher education institutions and the study programmes. They all have the right to comment on the processes and procedures and are actively probed for their recommendations for further improvement of VLUHR QA's functioning.
- The feedback mechanisms (internal as well as external) are oriented towards the constant improvement of the processes and procedures and the functioning of VLUHR QA as an evaluation body.
- Various mechanisms are in place to register, discuss and interpret the findings and suggestions from all stakeholders.
- After the suggestions and recommendations have been discussed with the VLUHR QA Board and discussed with the VLUHR QA Advisory Committee, the improvement measures are adhered into the yearly action and improvement plan for internal quality assurance of VLUHR QA.

### Cyclical ENQA external review of quality assurance agencies

The Quality Assurance Unit of VLHORA (VLHORA QAU) underwent its first external audit in 2008, the Quality Assurance Unit of VLIR (VLIR QAU) underwent its first external audit in 2009. Since its merger in 2012, VLUHR QA, as the legal successor of VLIR QAU and VLHORA QAU, is now subject to a new external review process in June 2014.

### ENQA CRITERION 8 CONSISTENCY OF JUDGEMENTS, APPEALS SYSTEM AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO AIMS OF ENQA

- I *The agency pays careful attention to its declared principles at all times, and ensures both that its requirements and processes are managed professionally and that its judgments and decisions are reached in a consistent manner, even if the judgments are formed by different groups;*
- II *If the agency makes formal quality assurance decisions, or conclusions which have formal consequences, it should have an appeals procedure. The nature and form of the appeals procedure should be determined in the light of the constitution of the agency;*
- III *The agency is willing to contribute actively to the aims of ENQA.*

VLUHR QA pays careful attention to its declared principles at all times, and ensures both that its requirements and processes are managed professionally and that its judgments and decisions are reached in a consistent manner, even if the judgments are formed by different panels. However, due to the nature of a peer review system and the openness of the assessment framework, in the application of evaluation criteria details may differ between panels. Within each panel, consistency is guaranteed (see ESG 2.3 Criteria for decisions).

The Manual for the External Quality Assurance in Flemish Higher Education and internal quality handbook guarantee a consistent approach to all assessments managed by VLUHR QA. Regular (two-weekly) staff meetings offer enough space for exchange between project managers and management team to discuss how to handle all aspects of the assessments.

In case parallel panels assess similar programmes within the same field of study, frequent exchange between panel chairs and panel secretaries is organised, to make sure judgments and decisions are reached in a consistent manner. Based on the experiences with parallel panels in the new assessment round, VLUHR QA plans in its action plan for 2014 an evaluation of the chosen approach and plans exchange with fellow quality assurance agencies on this topic.

Although VLUHR QA doesn't make formal quality assurance decisions, an appeals procedure is in place. More information on this procedure is given under 2.4 *External quality assurance activities*. Besides the possibility for study programmes to give feedback on the first draft study programme report and the possibility to publish an annex in the public report if they don't agree, institutions can appeal negative scores in their assessment report.

As indicated under 2.5 *International dimension*, VLUHR QA is actively involved in the ENQA network and has the ambition to continue to contribute actively to the aims of ENQA.



## **PART 3**

Closing remarks





Building on the long traditions in external quality assurance activities of VLIR and VLHORA, in the past year VLUHR QA has developed an own identity, a unified team, and the necessary structures to strengthen its role in promoting a quality culture in higher education in Flanders and abroad. The new VLUHR QA Board with international QA experts has started its task. The integration process of the two former quality assurance units coincided with a new assessment round and a new assessment framework and it happened in a year with a peak in the assessments which had to be organised. No additional capacity was available to develop the internal processes and structures. Thanks to the contribution of the whole staff, huge steps have been taken. A new uniform roadmap was developed to implement study programme assessments, questionnaires and focus group discussions were organised to receive feedback from the higher education institutions and panel members, a mission, vision and strategic framework were developed and this framework has been operationalised in an action plan for 2014. Based on all the progress which has been made, VLUHR QA is convinced it complies with the European Standards and Guidelines.

Nevertheless, VLUHR QA sees several challenges in order to further develop its position as a recognised partner for the development of the quality cultures in Flemish higher education and abroad. To create the right conditions, VLUHR QA is developing common labour conditions for its staff. The available budget is limited and has led to smaller peer review panels and shorter visits. VLUHR QA wants to discuss the impact of these developments with its stakeholders in order to investigate how high quality can be delivered with limited resources. First steps have been taken to better disclose the results of study programme assessments to potential students and society. VLUHR QA wants to further invest to reach a broader readership. VLUHR QA is furthermore convinced that the knowledge and experience it has built up could benefit higher education institutions in Flanders and abroad. It therefore wants to investigate how this could be done best.



# **ANNEXES**



## ANNEX 1

### Higher education Codex (art. Art.II.121-132)

#### Chapter 8 Quality Assurance

##### Section 1 Internal and external quality assurance

###### Art. II.121.<sup>125</sup>

Statutory registered institutions provide internal and external quality assurance for the research activities:

- 1 they monitor the quality of their research activities continuously and on their own initiative;
- 2 working together with other domestic and foreign institutions as far as possible, they carry out a regular assessment of the quality of the institution's research activities, at least once every eight years. A public report is produced containing the findings of this assessment;
- 3 they follow up the findings of the quality assessment in their policies.

###### Art. II.122.<sup>126</sup>

§1. The institutions referred to in article II.1. provide internal and external quality assurance for teaching activities. They monitor the quality of their teaching activities continuously and on their own initiative. They involve students, alumni, external experts from the professional field and international experts in internal and external quality assurance processes. They work together to provide regular external assessments of the quality of their teaching activities, for each programme or programme cluster depending on the situation, for the purpose of granting accreditations during the second round of programme accreditations. From the third round of programme accreditations onwards, an external assessment in accordance with this article is no longer required for institutions that have a positive institutional review decision.

§2. The external assessment is carried out by a review panel which completes its activities within a timeframe of 12 months. The review panel includes at least 1 student.

<sup>125</sup> Article II.121.: Decree of the Flemish Community on the restructuring of higher education in Flanders (hereinafter: Restructuring Decree/Structuurdecreet), article 92. [cf. supra]

<sup>126</sup> Article II.122.: Structuurdecreet, article 93.

§3. The external assessments are organised by a quality assurance agency which draws up a Manual for the external quality assurance in Flemish Higher Education after discussion with the accreditation organization. The manual is made public.

The Manual for the external quality assurance in Flemish Higher Education includes as a minimum:

- 1 the possibility for the board of the institution to submit technical comments and substantive objections before the panel produces the final external assessment;
- 2 the obligation for the review panel to produce a written response to the institution's board addressing the substantive objections that have been put forward;
- 3 the way in which the independence of assessments is guaranteed;
- 4 the way in which the quality assurance agency composes the review panels to allow the review panels to reach an informed opinion on what is internationally desirable standard practice in terms of the exit level for programmes with a related qualification;
- 5 the way in which the review panel has reached its opinion and the way in which it is guaranteed that opinions on the criteria referred to in the accreditation framework are comparable across the various programmes;
- 6 the way in which the members of the review panels are trained with a view to a uniform implementation of the manual for the external quality assurance and the accreditation framework;
- 7 the minimum requirements that must be satisfied by a manual for the external quality assurance to make it possible to ensure that sufficient generic quality assurances are present.

While section 4 and articles II.148 and II.382 still apply, the VLUHR QA Board organises external assessments of the programmes at the institutions referred to in article II.1. The VLUHR QA Board is the autonomous body within the Flemish Higher Education Council which acts as a quality assurance agency as referred to in article II.37, §2.

§4. For the organization of external assessments institutions may make use of a different quality assurance agency which is included on the European QA Register for Higher Education (EQAR) or is accredited by the Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) for one of the following reasons:

- 1 international comparability of the programme to be accredited with comparable programmes at foreign institutions;
- 2 a good match between the expertise of the other quality assurance agency and the specific content of the programme to be accredited.

§5. While section 1 still applies, the following stipulations apply to teacher training programmes:

The first external assessment of the bachelor-after-bachelor programmes in education and the specific teacher training programmes must be completed before the end of 2012. From 2013 onwards, external assessment of integrated teacher training programmes, bachelor-after-bachelor programmes in education and specific teacher training programmes will take place at least once every 8 years.

The review panels are always supplemented by experts representing potential employers (the professional field) and experts who are sensitive to the needs of mature students.

Teacher training programmes are grouped into a cluster of integrated teacher training programmes, a cluster of bachelor-after-bachelor programmes in education and a cluster of specific teacher training programmes.

If the specific teacher training programme is organised as a Major of a master's programme with 120 credits, this will be covered by the peer review of the specific teacher training programme.

§6. The review panels incorporate the findings of their assessment of each programme, programme cluster and related programmes into a public report.

§7. The institutions follow up the findings resulting from the quality assessment in the policy of the institution.

§8. Sections 2, 3, 4 and 6 are not applicable to programmes for which the accreditation procedure is used as referred to in article II.149.

**Art. II.123.**<sup>127</sup> The university college in question or, in the case of a consortium, the university colleges in question, monitor the quality assurance of teaching and research at the School of Arts.

**Art. II.124.**<sup>128</sup> The Initiating University as referred to in article II.5 monitors the quality assurance of research and teaching at the institution.

**Art. II.125.**<sup>129</sup> §1. If the quality of teaching in a specific teacher training programme is found to be unsatisfactory after a comprehensive quality assessment carried out according to article II.122, §3, or if it cannot reasonably be considered to constitute higher education, the Flemish Government may decide that:

- 1 the students on that programme are not eligible for the purpose of calculating the number of course participant-hours as referred to in article 99 of the decree of 15 June 2007 on adult education;
- 2 the degrees and diplomas of students on that programme are no longer eligible for the purpose of calculating funding as referred to in article III.33;
- 3 the degrees and diplomas of students on that programme are no longer eligible for the purpose of calculating funding as referred to in article III.32;
- 4 the institution's board may no longer award a teaching qualification on completion of the programme.

The registered students or course participants must, however, be given the opportunity to complete their programme. The Flemish Government will take the necessary measures to this effect.

An exclusion decision cannot be taken until the Flemish Government has given a warning to the institution concerned. This warning signifies that it is intending to take such an exclusion

<sup>127</sup> Article II.123.: Structuurdecreet, article 8 quater, paragraph two.

<sup>128</sup> Article II.124.: Decree of the Flemish Community on universities (University Decree/Universiteitendecreet), article 169 quater, §5.

<sup>129</sup> Article II.125.: Structuurdecreet, article 93 bis.

decision and stipulates a period within which the warning must be followed up and during which it is available for consultation in this connection if required. The exclusion decision will not take effect until the second academic year after this.

§2. If a specific teacher training programme has failed to participate in the peer review referred to in article II.122, or part thereof, the institution will lose the authority to offer the programme in question starting in the academic year after the academic year in which the peer review takes place.

## Section 2 Institutional review

### Subsection 1 Framework and criteria

**Art. II.126.**<sup>130</sup> §1. The institutions referred to in article II.1. will be subject to an institutional review with effect from the 2015-2016 academic year. In an institutional review an external panel assesses the policy processes that are put in place by an institution to guarantee that it is carrying out its higher education duties to a high standard of quality. The review panel also includes in this the policy processes that have been set up by the institution to support the teaching that it provides in its programmes on the basis of its tasks in the areas of research and its public and scientific remit.

§2. The assessment carried out by the review panel covers the following themes:

- 1 the view of the institution on higher education and the quality of the higher education and the policy pursued, policy aims and policy principles in relation to education and its policies in the areas of research, public and scientific remit in relation to the quality of teaching;
- 2 the policy actions, processes, procedures, practices and instruments that are used by the institution to implement its policies effectively and optimise the quality of the teaching that is provided;
- 3 the feedback and follow-up systems and, in particular, the internal quality assurance systems set up by the institution to guarantee the effectiveness of its policy actions in relation to the quality of teaching;
- 4 the actions that are taken by an institution to improve the realisation of its policy aims.

§3. The accreditation organization defines the following within the assessment framework used for institutional review:

- 1 the criteria against which the themes mentioned above will be tested;
- 2 the conditions for rendering opinions of 'satisfactory' or 'unsatisfactory' for the aforementioned criteria;
- 3 the verifiable facts that can be used as a basis for rendering opinions and how a particular fact can be demonstrated to constitute evidence.

The assessment framework used for institutional review must be approved by the Flemish Government before it can be implemented, with a prior advice from the VLUHR as Umbrella Organization and from umbrella student associations.

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<sup>130</sup> Article II126.: Structuurdecreet, article 93 ter.



§4. Contrary to section 1, the institutions referred to in articles II.19, II.20 and II.21 and the approved Faculties of Protestant Theology referred to in articles II.105 and II.106 are not subject to institutional review.

### **Subsection 2 Application**

**Art. II.127.**<sup>131</sup> §1. The institutions referred to in article II.1. request an institutional review or an extension of an institutional review from the accreditation organization. The first round of institutional reviews will take place in the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 academic years. The second round of institutional reviews will take place in the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 academic years.

The accreditation organization draws up the timetable for the first and second rounds of institutional reviews in consultation with the VLUHR and determines the final application deadline for each institutional review.

§2. While section 1 still applies, a request for extension of an institutional review must be submitted no later than 1 year before expiry of the validity of the positive institutional review decision.

§3. If an institution's board has submitted a request for an institutional review within the period referred to in section 2, the period covered by the current positive institutional review decision will be extended until the time when an irrevocable decision has been made on this request.

### **Subsection 3 The review panel**

**Art. II.128.**<sup>132</sup> §1. The accreditation organization composes the review panel which will carry out the institutional review and it also coordinates the institutional review. The institution being assessed is entitled to lodge well-reasoned objections against the composition of the review panel within a period of 15 calendar days from the day after receipt of the notification from the accreditation organization.

The review panel consists of at least 5 members, including 1 student. The majority of the members work abroad. The review panel has administrative expertise, educational expertise and assessment expertise and is aware of developments in the higher education sector both domestically and abroad. At least 1 member must have sufficient knowledge of the Flemish higher education system.

The members of the panel are independent, have the necessary expertise and, with the exception of the student, have had no ties with the institution being assessed for at least 5 years. The accreditation organization checks these conditions.

The review panel checks the correctness of its findings in relation to the institution's policies in more specific and/or comprehensive ways on the basis of practices at lower levels in the organization and/or in relation to key substantive issues.

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<sup>131</sup> Article II.127.: Structuurdecreet, article 93 quater.

<sup>132</sup> Article II.128.: Structuurdecreet, article 93 quinquies.

§2. The accreditation organization will, after consultation with the VLUHR and the student umbrella associations, determine the following in a review scenario:

- 1 the way in which institutional reviews are carried out;
- 2 the steps in the assessment process;
- 3 the data sent by the institution's board when requesting an institutional review and the documents that must be available for perusal during visits to the institution.

#### **Subsection 4 Report and decision**

##### **Art. II.129**<sup>133</sup>

§1. The accreditation organization that has received the request for an institutional review completes the institutional review process within 12 months after receipt of the request by issuing a decision in which the accreditation organization states its opinion on each of the four themes referred to in article II.126, §2.

The accreditation organization may, after the application has been submitted and before the draft assessment report and decision are sent out, ask the institution's board for additional information, explanations and clarifications. If the accreditation organization makes use of this possibility, this will be stated in the assessment report. The accreditation organization will define, in the regulations referred to in article II.27, the administrative principles concerning requests for additional information, explanations and clarifications and concerning the handling of responses.

§2. The accreditation organization will set out the findings of the review referred to in section 1 in an assessment report, which will serve to substantiate the decision.

One month before expiry of the decision-making deadline referred to in section 1, the accreditation organization will submit to the institution's board a draft assessment report and a draft decision on conclusion of the institutional review. The institution's board will have an opportunity to submit its objections and comments within a period of 15 calendar days starting on the day after receipt of the draft.

§3. The accreditation organization will define in the regulations referred to in article II.27 the procedures according to which objections and comments are handled. These procedures can never result in the expiry of the decision-making deadline referred to in section 1.

§4. The decision on conclusion of an institutional review will take effect on the day when the previous institutional review decision expires, or if an institutional review is being granted to an institution for the first time, it will take effect on the date when notification is made of the decision.

§5. The reports of the institutional reviews are public.

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<sup>133</sup> Article II.128.: Structuurdecreet, article 93 quinquies.

### Subsection 5 Legal consequences

**Art. II.130.**<sup>134</sup> §1. There will be no legal consequences for the institution or for the programmes resulting from the first round of institutional reviews.

§2. From the second round of institutional reviews the institutional reviews will have the following legal consequences:

- 1 if the institution 'satisfies' all the themes in the opinion of the accreditation organization, that institution will no longer have the obligation to request accreditation of a programme on the basis of a published external assessment and the decision on conclusion of the institutional review will be valid for 6 years;
- 2 if the institution does not satisfy all the themes in the opinion of the accreditation organization, the accreditation organization will restrict the period of validity of the decision on conclusion of the institutional review to no more than 3 years. The accreditation organization will carry out a further limited review of the institution no later than 6 months before the end of this period. The restricted period of validity referred to above will be deducted from the general period of validity of 6 years.  
During this period the institution cannot submit any more requests for a new programme. If, after the new, limited review, the institution does not satisfy all the themes in the opinion of the accreditation organization, the institution will no longer be funded and the institution will lose its authority to award degrees. The institution must ensure, through collaboration with another institution, that the students are able to continue their programme. The Flemish Government will take the necessary measures to this effect;
- 3 if, in the opinion of the accreditation organization, the institution does not satisfy any of the themes, the institution will no longer be funded and the institution will lose its authority to award degrees with effect from the following academic year. The institution must ensure, through collaboration with another institution, that the students are able to continue their programme. The Flemish Government will take the necessary measures to this effect.

### Subsection 6 Costs, charges and assessment

**Art. II.131.**<sup>135</sup> The institution will bear the costs of the institutional review. The Flemish Government determines the charges for carrying out an institutional review and may, in doing so, take the size of the institution into account. The following principles will be taken into account when determining these charges:

- 1 the charges for the institutional review amount to no less than 10,000 euros and no more than 60,000 euros;
- 2 the amounts referred to in point 1° may be indexed annually. The Flemish Government will determine the way in which this indexation process is implemented.

The Flemish Government will carry out an evaluation of the first institutional reviews by the end of June 2018. At the same time as this evaluation, the Flemish Government will set up pilot projects to ascertain the feasibility of programme accreditations based on a programme file in accordance with the stipulations of articles II.59 and II.77. The Flemish Government will also ensure that a general evaluation of the functioning and impact of the accreditation and institutional review system is carried out before 1 January 2024. This evaluation will also check whether there is an evident reduction in the amount of administrative burden.

<sup>134</sup> Article II.130.: Structuurdecreet, article 93 septies. §2, to take effect on a date to be determined by VLAREG.

<sup>135</sup> Article II.131.: Structuurdecreet, article 93 octies.

### **Subsection 7 Procedure in the event of a lack of agreement on a negative institutional review decision**

**Art. II.132.**<sup>136</sup> If the concluding decision from an institutional review is negative, the institution's board may submit an appeal to the Flemish Government against the negative institutional review decision. The appeal must be submitted within a period of 30 calendar days starting on the day after notification of the negative institutional review decision is served to the institution.

The Flemish Government will assess the disputed decision against the stipulations of parts 2 and 4 and of the regulations referred to in article II.27. The Flemish Government will take a decision within a guideline period of 60 calendar days beginning on the day following the date of receipt of the appeal. It will annul the negative institutional review decision if it is clearly not in accordance with the stipulations set out in this paragraph.

The Flemish Government may define more detailed rules for the conduct of the appeals procedure.

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<sup>136</sup> Article II. 132.; Structuurdecreet, article 93 novies.

## ANNEX 2A

### Governance structure of VLUHR QA

#### OUTLINE OF VLUHR QA

##### 1 A renewed governance structure for external quality assurance in higher education

###### 1.1 Actors involved and their powers

###### **The VLUHR Board and the VLUHR QA Board**

In accordance with the decree of 4 April 2003 on the restructuring of higher education in Flanders (Amended by the Education Decree XIX) the VLUHR is responsible for carrying out the external quality assessments in the institutions as referred to in Article 93. The Constitution of the VLUHR stipulates that the association may delegate this authority to an autonomous body. In this context, and in accordance with its autonomy in regard to the institutions involved, the VLUHR Board grants the following powers to the VLUHR QA Board:

- ratification and establishment of the review panels;
- monitoring and concrete implementation of the peer reviews and conformity of these with the VLUHR Manual for the external quality assurance in Flemish Higher Education;
- participation in external projects in the context of quality assurance;
- external representation of VLUHR QA, inter alia in dealings with organizations such as ENQA, INQAAHE, EQAR etc.).

The VLUHR Board may also, in accordance with the expertise present on the VLUHR QA Board (see 2.1. Establishment of the VLUHR QA Board), call upon the VLUHR QA Board to make recommendations on the operation and development of the quality assurance system in Flanders.

The VLUHR QA Board ensures that the bodies responsible for quality assurance, in particular VLUHR QA, and the institutions are able, in dialogue, to ensure the development of a high-quality and broadly supported quality assurance system.

The following matters are reserved for the authority of the Board and General Assembly of the VLUHR:

- approval of the mission of VLUHR QA;
- approval of the budget and the multi-annual budget for the activities in relation to quality assurance;
- approval of the personnel policy;
- conclusion of agreements with the government or with third parties, excluding assignments defined by the decree on quality assurance in higher education institutions in Flanders.

In accordance with the Constitution, personnel decisions in relation to staff carrying out external quality assurance duties in higher education in Flanders and decisions in relation to budgets and the financial position of VLUHR QA are made by the VLUHR Board on a recommendation by the VLUHR QA Board or the VLUHR QA Director who is authorised to do so. The VLUHR QA Board also advises the VLUHR Board on possible participation in external projects in the context of quality assurance.

Via the umbrella bodies VLIR, VLHORA and VLUHR, universities and university colleges remain the official bodies for the purpose of advising and negotiating with the government.

#### **VLUHR QA**

VLUHR QA is responsible, under the leadership of the QA Director, for:

- coordinating and organising peer reviews of higher education programmes;
- monitoring developments in the area of quality assurance;
- participating in external projects in the area of quality assurance;
- providing services in the area of quality assurance to higher education institutions;
- preparing, implementing and monitoring decisions made by the VLUHR QA Board.

#### **VLUHR QA Advisory Committee**

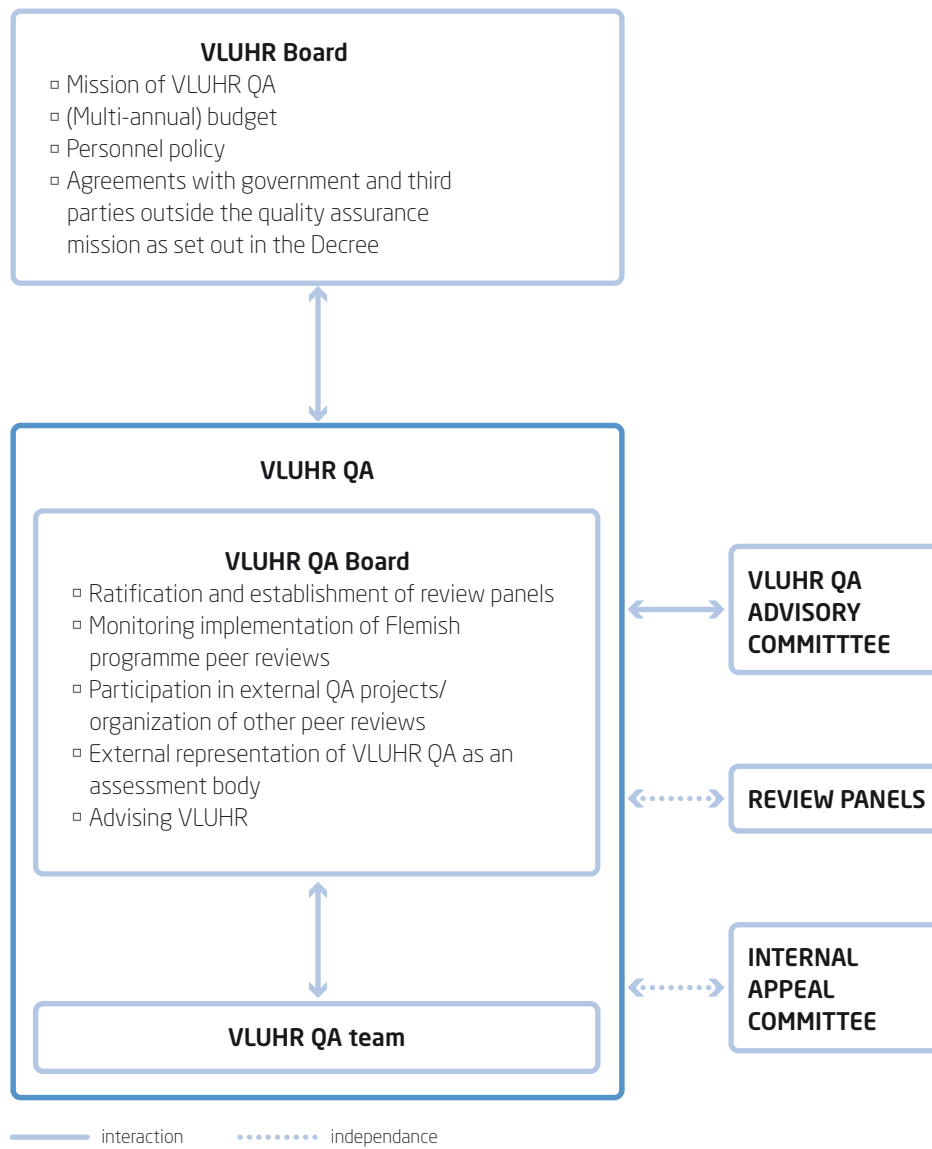
The higher education institutions, students and social partners are involved in the activities of VLUHR QA through their representation on the VLUHR QA Advisory Committee. All matters are submitted to the VLUHR QA Advisory Committee for a recommendation where the issue extends beyond the individual case.

The VLUHR QA Advisory Committee is made up of 16 representatives of higher education institutions, who are allocated proportionally between the Associations in a 5/4/3/2/2 ratio, 2 student representatives and 3 representatives of the social partners.

The VLUHR QA Advisory Committee is chaired by one of the experts from the VLUHR QA Board.

## 1.2 Relationships between the various actors

Figure 6 **Governance structure of VLUHR QA**



\*For the powers of the VLUHR Board as regards the relationship with VLUHR QA. This does not detract from the other functions of the VLUHR.

### **Relationship between VLUHR and VLUHR QA Board**

The VLUHR retains final responsibility for the long-term financial and substantive policy of VLUHR QA. The VLUHR QA Board issues recommendations to the VLUHR on these issues.

The VLUHR QA Board also advises VLUHR on the functioning and development of the quality assurance system in Flanders.

### **Relationship between the VLUHR QA Board and VLUHR QA Team**

The VLUHR QA Board and the VLUHR QA Team together make up the quality assurance agency of the VLUHR. The VLUHR QA Team reports to and supports the VLUHR QA Board. The VLUHR QA Board provides guidance to VLUHR QA. Day-to-day management of VLUHR QA is delegated to the QA Director.

### **Relationship between VLUHR QA Advisory Committee and VLUHR QA Board**

The VLUHR QA Advisory Committee is the body that advises the VLUHR QA Board. Through the VLUHR QA Advisory Committee the institutions, students and social partners are involved in the work of the VLUHR QA Board. The VLUHR QA Advisory Committee makes recommendations at the request of the VLUHR QA Board but it can also draft recommendations to the VLUHR QA Board on its own initiative.

The flow of information between the VLUHR QA Advisory Committee and the VLUHR QA Board is also ensured – alongside the fact that it is chaired by a member of the VLUHR QA Board – by the submission of the approved minutes of the meetings of the VLUHR QA Board to the members of the VLUHR QA Advisory Committee.

### **Relationship between the VLUHR QA Team and the VLUHR QA Advisory Committee**

The VLUHR QA Advisory Committee and the VLUHR QA Team consult in order to formulate recommendations for the VLUHR QA Board. The VLUHR QA Director thereby focuses on the potential to act upon the recommendations/proposals.

The VLUHR QA Team supports the work of the VLUHR QA Advisory Committee. The VLUHR QA Director and/or the deputy appointed by him/her attends the meetings.

### **Relationship between VLUHR QA Board and Review Panels**

The VLUHR QA Board instructs the review panels. The VLUHR QA Board supervises the proper conduct of peer reviews in terms of procedure. In this context the VLUHR QA Board may intervene if a review panel is not working in accordance with the rules. The VLUHR QA Board may also intervene if a chair or member of the review panel, when working on peer reviews, acts in a way that is substantively and/or ethically incorrect (in the case of members this is done after consultation with the chair of the review panel).

The VLUHR QA Board does not interfere in the formation of substantive opinions by the review panels. The review panel is solely responsible for the content of the peer review report up to the time when this report is submitted for publication. At that time the VLUHR QA Board takes over responsibility for the external review report from the review panel and is responsible for monitoring any additional procedures.



## 2 Role and duties of the VLUHR QA Board

### 2.1 Establishment of the VLUHR QA Board

During the start-up phase, the VLUHR QA Board consists of seven experts. Its Constitution provides for an extension to a maximum of nine members as needed. Some members have international experience. To avoid hampering the proper functioning of the VLUHR QA Board, they must have at least an understanding of the Dutch language (reading and listening) and have adequate availability.

The members of the VLUHR QA Board assume the role of experts and have no demonstrable links to any higher education institution in Flanders.

The members collectively have the required competencies to cover the abilities that are considered necessary for the VLUHR QA Board:

- a** knowledge of quality assurance;
- b** knowledge of internal/external quality assurance in higher education;
- c** knowledge and understanding of higher education in Flanders;
- d** legal knowledge;
- e** knowledge in the financial domain;
- f** policy experience;
- g** management/leadership skills.

The members of the VLUHR QA Board are appointed by the VLUHR Board as proposed by the VLUHR QA Team.

### 2.2 Duties

It is clear from the operation and structures outlined above that the VLUHR QA Board will be fed from a number of different channels. It will mainly interact with the VLUHR Board, the VLUHR QA Advisory Committee and the VLUHR QA Team, under the leadership of a Director. In the medium term it can therefore be expected that the activities of the VLUHR QA Board will crystallise around two areas:

- a** Powers/autonomy delegated by VLUHR  
The VLUHR QA Board is primarily responsible for a number of activities that are connected with the essence of the external review process. These mainly involve the ratification and establishment of review panels as proposed by the VLUHR QA Team, in consultation with the programmes involved; (making changes to) the timeline that has been set out for peer reviews, developing and refining procedures; monitoring the correct implementation of peer reviews (monitoring internal and external appeals procedures or supplementary procedures). A key characteristic of these activities is their recurrence: throughout the second round of peer reviews and accreditations, this core duty will form a fixed part of the agenda of the VLUHR QA Board because it supports the external review activities in their entirety.  
The VLUHR QA Board will also develop a role in relation to the functioning of the VLUHR QA Team, within the mission outlined by the VLUHR Board. The VLUHR QA Board may thus set itself the task of helping to define priorities in relation to the participation in and/or organization of international projects in the context of (programme) peer reviews. Its responsibilities also include internal quality assurance by VLUHR QA and external representation of VLUHR QA in dealings with (international) quality assurance organizations.

**b** Advising the VLUHR

Due to its overarching perspective, the VLUHR QA Board is able to offer advice on the activities and development of the Flemish system of external quality assurance in higher education.

### **3 Internal organization of the integrated VLUHR QA Team**

#### **Internal organization**

The VLUHR QA Team works in an integrated way and is guided in this by a single manager.

VLUHR QA brings together staff from the respective QA Teams of VLHORA and VLIR. This integration and collaboration offers a number of operational advantages which will lead to gains in productivity as compared with the current way of working in separate units:

- Efficient division of labour: bringing permanent staff together will increase the working capacity of the unit. Working with permanent staff who can, in principle, be deployed for peer reviews of all higher education programmes, leads to an increase in scale that facilitates the planning and organization of the work (coping with peaks and troughs in the workload and with staff turnover). It also creates opportunities to form teams including a combination of experienced personnel and 'beginners', which is becoming necessary due to the increasing complexity of the peer reviews.
- Professional gains: a larger working capacity makes it possible to create a division of tasks and specialisation for the staff and also allows the organization to work in a professional way, which also benefits higher education institutions.
- Organizational efficiency gains: joining forces in the areas of coordination, administrative support, financial monitoring and support, external representation etc. improves the efficiency of these activities and will therefore have a favourable impact on costs/overheads.

The internal organization of the VLUHR QA Team takes place on the basis of the effectiveness of the work and the experience and specialisation among the staff. The work is organised in a way that takes the needs of the organization into account, while also listening to the wishes of the staff. This makes it possible to develop relative specialisations according to the disciplines and/or types of higher education involved, but the organization also makes it possible to offer varied duties.

The duties of a staff member working for VLUHR QA include both peer reviews of higher education programmes and supporting tasks in relation to the duties of the autonomous quality assurance body. The scope and content of the supporting tasks may differ from one staff member to another.

#### **Employment status**

As the staff of the quality assurance units of VLIR and VLHORA are brought together in VLUHR QA, it becomes desirable that all staff working for VLUHR QA should have the same conditions of employment. It is therefore recommended that the employment status of VLIR and VLHORA staff should be allowed to converge, and that efforts should be made to introduce a unified employment status. This applies not only to staff of the integrated VLUHR QA Team but also to policy staff /administrative staff working for VLIR and VLHORA who carry out similar tasks and have the same profiles.

The preparatory work in the Multi-annual Budget and Employment Status task force has clarified the differences in status that exist between VLIR and VLHORA and has thus generated material making it possible to create a single unified status.

Pending this, it has been decided to undertake secondments of VLIR and VLHORA staff to VLUHR QA according to the needs identified in the budget.

### **Size of the workforce**

In order to coordinate and guide all the peer reviews and deal with the workload in a flexible way, an adequate workforce is needed within VLUHR QA. Deployment of trained and assessed external secretaries is only an emergency solution in specific cases. Staff (and external secretaries) are given training within VLUHR QA according to their work on peer review activities, in accordance with the agreement that has been concluded with the NVAO [Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders] on this.



## ANNEX 2B

### Organization chart of VLUHR QA Team

#### ADDENDUM TO POLICY DOCUMENT 'GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE OF VLUHR QA'

##### 1 Internal organization

The VLUHR QA Team is responsible, under the leadership of the VLUHR QA Director, for:

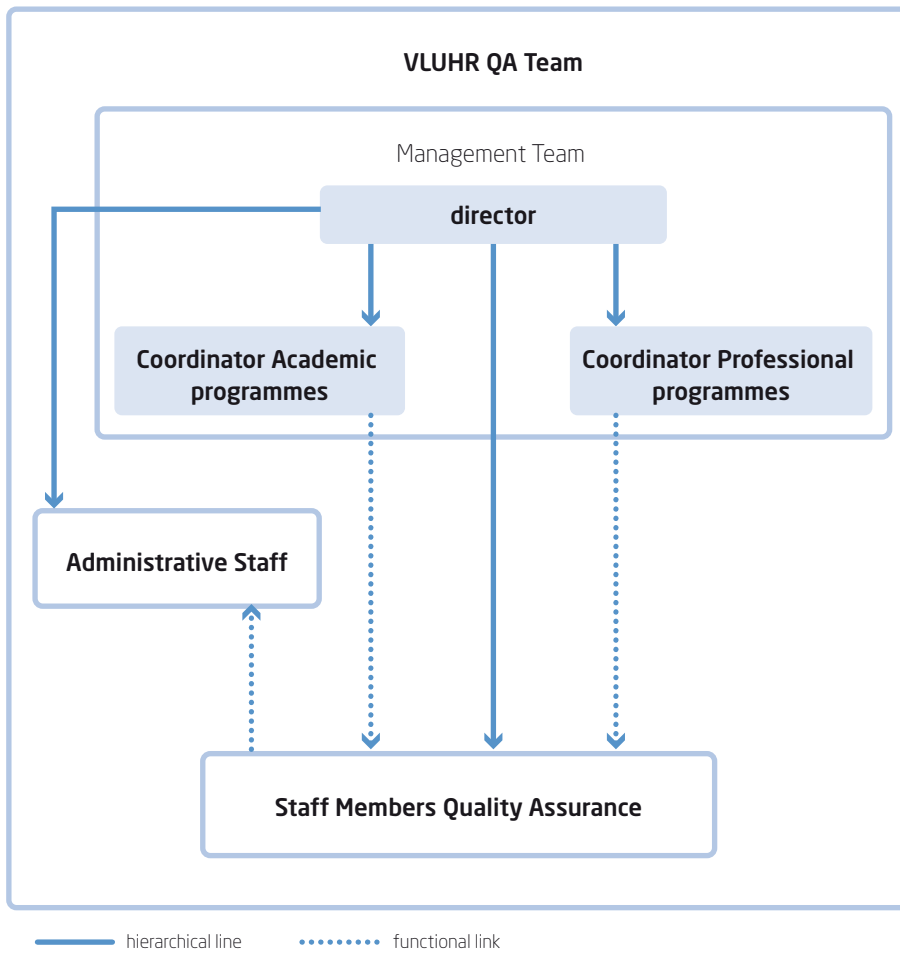
- coordinating and organising higher education programme peer reviews;
- monitoring developments in the area of quality assurance;
- participating in external projects in the area of quality assurance;
- providing services in the area of quality assurance to higher education institutions;
- preparing, implementing and monitoring decisions made by the VLUHR QA Board.

In order to carry out these duties the VLUHR QA Team has the internal organization structure set out below (Fig. 7).

The Director is responsible for day-to-day management of VLUHR QA and is assisted in this by the QA coordinators. Together they form the management team.

The VLUHR QA Team also includes the Administrative Support Staff and the Permanent QA Staff. In order to monitor, support and shape developments in the area of quality assurance, the permanent staff are also involved in working groups. These working groups are attended by a member of the management team.

Figure 7 Organization chart of VLUHR QA Team



## 2 Consultation structure

The consultation structure encourages an open dialogue which is both vertical (top-down and bottom-up) and horizontal within VLUHR QA. It consists of the following consultation bodies:

### **VLUHR QA Management Team (VLUHR QA MT):**

QA Director and Coordinators

### **VLUHR QA Team:**

all staff within VLUHR QA

### **VLUHR QA internal working groups**

The agendas of consultation meetings between the management and the team are tuned to each other and structured to include the following policy areas as agenda items:

- Personnel & Organization (P&O)
- Finances (Fin)
- Internal QA (IQA)
- Marketing & Communication (M&C)
- Information and Communication Technology (ICT)
- Peer Review Projects
- Internationalisation
- Miscellaneous

These respective policy areas are led by a member of the management team, specifically:

|                      |  |
|----------------------|--|
| P&O                  | Director – Maria Weymans                           |
| Fin                  | Director – Maria Weymans                           |
| IQA                  | QA coordinator – Klara De Wilde                    |
| M&C                  | QA Coordinator – Marleen Bronders                  |
| ICT                  | Director – Maria Weymans                           |
| Peer Review Projects | QA coordinators – Marleen Bronders, Klara De Wilde |
| Internationalisation | Director – Maria Weymans                           |

The management team holds weekly consultation meetings on Thursdays from 10.00 to 12.00.

The VLUHR QA Team holds consultation meetings every 2 weeks with the whole team, on Tuesdays from 10.00 to 12.00. Enough time is set aside to allow feedback of the running peer review projects in the context of the NAS [New Accreditation System] Decree.

Staff can put forward agenda items for these consultation meetings. The members of the working groups plan the consultation meetings themselves and are able to invite other staff members to participate in discussions on a specific item.

### 3 Consultation with actors within VLUHR QA

#### **VLUHR Board**

The Director of VLUHR QA attends the consultation meetings of the Board, as member for a specific agenda item.

#### **VLUHR QA Board**

The management team (Director and QA coordinator(s)) attends the consultation meetings with the VLUHR QA Board.

The agendas and minutes of these meetings are provided by QA Coordinator Marleen Bronders.

#### **VLUHR QA Advisory Committee**

The management team (Director and QA coordinator(s)) attends consultation meetings with the VLUHR QA Advisory Committee. The agendas and minutes for these meetings are provided by QA coordinator Klara De Wilde.



## ANNEX 3

### List of the personnel of VLUHR QA Team

#### Management team

| Name                             | Degree                              | Tasks  | FT/PT | Contract           |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|-------|--------------------|
| <a href="#">Maria Weymans</a>    | PhD in Physical Therapy             | Director QA  | FT    | 01/02/2013 (VLUHR) |
| <a href="#">Marleen Bronders</a> | Master in Educational sciences      | QA coordinator (academic oriented study programs)                        | FT    | 15/03/1993 (VLIR)  |
| <a href="#">Klara De Wilde</a>   | Master in Applied economic sciences | QA coordinator (professionally oriented, nautic and arts study programs) | FT    | 1/10/2001 (VLHORA) |

## QA Staff

| Name                    | Degree  | Tasks   | FT/PT    | Contract                               |
|-------------------------|---|---|----------|--|
| Anne-Sophie Seghers     | Bachelor in Primary school teacher<br>Master in Educational sciences  | Project manager<br>Member IQA working group   | FT       | 01/09/2013 (VLUHR – one year contract) |
| Andreas Smets           | Master in Ancient history   | Project manager<br>Member M&C working group   | FT       | 1/01/2012 (VLIR)                       |
| Ciska De Ruyver         | Master in Ethics  | Project manager   | PT (50%) | 15/01/2011 (VLHORA)                    |
| Diana Faifer            | Master in Educational sciences  | Project manager<br>Member M&C working group   | FT       | 01/09/2013 (VLUHR – one year contract) |
| Els Van Zele            | PhD in Physics  | Project manager<br>Member IQA working group<br>Chair ENQA Working Group on KP3      | FT       | 21/03/2006 (VLIR)                      |
| Evelien Vandenhaute     | PhD in Oriental languages and cultures  | Project manager<br>Member M&C working group   | FT       | 11/04/2011 (VLHORA)                    |
| Filip Lammens           | Master in Philosophy  | Project manager<br>Member IQA working group   | FT       | 1/04/2008 (VLHORA)                     |
| Jannes Motmans          | Master in European Studies: Transnational and Global Perspectives<br>Master in Comparative and International Politics     | Project manager<br>Member M&C working group   | FT       | 01/09/2013 (VLUHR – one year contract) |
| Jasper Stockmans        | Master in Psychology  | Project manager<br>Member M&C working group   | FT       | 1/07/2008 (VLIR)                       |
| Joeri Deryckere         | Master in History   | Project manager<br>Member ICT working group   | FT       | 1/10/2012 (VLHORA)                     |
| Lies Praet              | Master in Language and literature (French and Dutch)  | Project manager<br>Member IQA working group   | FT       | 1/09/2011 (VLHORA)                     |
| Patrick Van den Bosch   | Master in History   | Project manager<br>Member M&C working group<br>Secretary of ENQA peer review panels | FT       | 1/07/2008 (VLIR)                       |
| Peter Daerden           | Master in History   | Project manager<br>Member M&C working group   | FT       | 1/11/2008 (VLIR)                       |
| Pieter-Jan Van de Velde | Master in Economic sciences<br>Master in Conflict & Development<br>Master in Sciences Sociales, Orientation Sociologie    | Project manager<br>Member IQA working group<br>Secretary of ENQA peer review panels | FT       | 6/01/2005 (VLIR)                       |
| Wim Hoskens             | Bachelor in Secondary school teacher<br>Master in Educational studies<br>Masterstudent in English Language and literature | Project manager<br>Member IQA working group   | FT       | 15/08/2013 (VLUHR – one year contract) |
| Wouter Teerlinck        | Master in Modern history<br>Master in International politics – European politics  | Project manager<br>Member ICT working group   | FT       | 1/02/2012 (VLIR)                       |

### Administrative support staff

| Name             | Degree                        | Tasks  | FT/PT    | Contract            |
|------------------|-------------------------------|--|----------|---------------------|
| An Despiegheleir | Bachelor in Office management | Administrative support (academic oriented study programs)                        | PT (80%) | 01/07/2007 (VLIR)   |
| Jessica Martin   | Bachelor in Office management | Administrative support (professionally oriented, nautic and arts study programs) | FT       | 01/11/2007 (VLHORA) |



## ANNEX 4

### First experiences with the new assessment round

- 1 This annex reports on the first findings of three types of key stakeholders (i.e. study programmes, the institutional coordinators and panel members and chairs) with respect to the various stages of the assessment processes. The results from the surveys and the first series of focus group discussions with these groups are outlined below. The following projects are addressed:

- the projects with a site visit in spring 2013 (the first projects in the current accreditation round);
- and the projects with a site visit in autumn 2013.

Most of the spring 2013 projects have been finalized, except for two projects where study programmes filed an internal appeal. A focus group discussion with the institutional coordinators was held on 23rd October 2013, the interviews with the study programmes and panel members have been held in the course of March 2014, resulting in a preliminary feedback from the panels, as not all focus group discussions had yet been held when the self-evaluation report was printed.

The full set of results of the first two rounds in the NAS system will be on display during the site visit (e.g. reflections from panel chairs about the internal appeal procedure).

The scale reported in these findings ranges from zero for 'entirely disagreement' – over five for a neutral response – to ten for 'entirely agreement' with the statements made in the survey.

The number of respondents (n):

Study programmes, first series (n = 40)

Study programmes, second series (n = 50)

Panel members, first series (n = 48)

Panel member, second series (n = 98)

- 2 The appreciation among study programmes, institutional coordinators and the panel members about the **information provided about the evaluation system** seems stable (mean between 6 and 7) in both series of evaluations. The large spread (with outliers indicating a negative appreciation) from the first series is not reproduced in the second series, indicating that the extreme negative appreciation, ventilated in some projects in the first round (set up when the protocol had not been fully finalized) have not been felt in the second round.
- 3 This finding is consistent with the higher appreciation, registered for the study programmes' **satisfaction with the 'Manual for the external quality assurance in Flemish Higher Education'** in the second series (autumn 2013), when the final version of the protocol has been used. A similar observation is made with respect to the stakeholders' appreciation for **the clarity of the assessment framework**. The appreciation increases while the spreading decreases.
- 4 There is a shift in the outcome with respect to the **timely distribution of the discipline-specific learning outcome framework**. Only 30% of the study programmes were positive about this statement. The focus group discussions show that study programmes are of the opinion that the discipline-specific learning outcome framework should have been finalized a few years prior to the study programmes' review, in order to provide some time to define the programme specific learning outcomes for each individual study programme and to adapt the assessment and evaluation practice. Quite some panel members are unclear how to interpret the discipline-specific learning outcome framework, as it is not always clear whether these aim at the competences an alumni should attain after some years of working experience or whether the discipline-specific learning outcome framework should be attained by every student upon graduation.
- 5 Most study programmes as well as panel members **appreciate the openness of the assessment framework**, although the larger degree of freedom in the framework makes some study programmes ask for more structure with respect to which aspects should be documented under the heading of which generic quality standard in the self-evaluation report.
- 6 About 85% of the study programmes report that they were **adequately involved in the nomination of candidate members** for the review panels. Chairs of the panels are more positive (average of 8.12 to 8.17), compared to the study programmes (average of 6.67 for the first series, and 6.94 for the second series). Institutional coordinators, overseeing the involvement of their study programmes at the institutional level, show an average of 6.94. The focus group discussions with the study programmes show that especially for parallel panels, it can be difficult to suggest an adequate number of good quality experts, independent from the programmes themselves to be seated in the panels.
- 7 Study programmes, on average appreciate the **final composition of the review panels** (mean of 6.90 in the first series, median 7, but large spreading of the responses). About 30% of the study programmes (in both series) find that there is a shortage in the range of expertise of the review panel. The comments in the survey and focus group discussions among the study programmes show that most often particular quite specific profiles of expertise are missed, or panel members seem to have a focus on a particular aspect or discipline. Quite a lot of study programmes reported that the educational expertise in the panel could be stronger. In the previous assessment round a distinct panel member with educational expertise was present in each panel. In the new assessment round the

various fields of expertise are distributed among a limited number of panel members, which often leads to a choice for panel members who combine domain expertise with educational expertise. On the contrary, panel chairs attribute a high level of appreciation to the **independence of their panel** (mean of 9, median 9).

- 8 Study programmes strongly appreciate **the preparative meeting with the project manager at the institution** and attribute the open atmosphere, getting acquainted and the barrier lowering aspect of this extensive contract of the project manager with the study programme and the self-evaluation team as a good reason to uphold this initiative. The focus groups report that the study programmes appreciate the possibility to adapt the site visit schedule to the particularities of the study programme. The panels tend to agree that they are well briefed and instructed about the circumstances of the site visits (mean of 8.75 in the first series, 8.67 in the second series).
- 9 There is a large spreading in how study programmes perceive whether the **site visit schedule allows them to demonstrate the quality of the study programme** (mean of 6.5, median 7 in the first series, mean of 7.06, median 7, in the second series). This shows that there is room for further improvement in this area. Panel members are convinced that the **strict timing of the various meetings is respected** (mean above 7.5), while they are **overall satisfied with the design of the site visits** (mean above 8.4). The panel members are convinced that **the discussions during the site visit contribute to the panel's understanding of the quality of the study programme** (mean 8.25 in the first series, 7.58 in the second series). In the focus group discussions some study programmes reported that panel members quite often seem to question only particular subjects during the discussions, which makes the attendants uncomfortable as they feel they have to defend themselves. In addition, some study programmes had the perception that panels may look into only a few aspects of the programme during the visits. When asked whether this observation was consistent with the oral report at the end of the site visit, the study programmes reported that the first impressions were well balanced and addressed all crucial element of the programme, (the latter statement was appreciated with a mean value of 7.32 in the first series and 7.22 in the second series). It is suggested that panels could explain more explicitly to their attendants, that it will most elaborately question items that are still unclear to the panel, after reading the self-evaluation report, in order to set the minds more at ease during the meetings. Panel members report on the time pressure experienced during the on-site visit, in particular, the time available for studying the documents on display and time for reflection is found to be limited.
- 10 Study programmes (mean of 7.74 in first series and 7.49 in second series), institutional coordinators (mean 7.12 overall) as well as panel members (9.2 in first series and 7.49 in second series) appreciate the **support they get from their project manager** during the on-site visit. Likewise all stakeholders commented they most often highly appreciate the commitment and collaboration with the project manager throughout the project.
- 11 There is some disparity in the **appreciation of the readability of the report** by the study programme, as there is a large spread in the responses. The mean is 6.58 in the first round. The panels score reasonably higher and award the report, representing their analysis and findings, drafted by the project manager, with a mean average of 8.16 out of 10. The same difference is visible in the **appreciation for the arguments provided in the report**, resulting in a mean average of 5.39 for the study programmes while arriving at a mean average of 8.11 by the panel members. The comments in the survey show appreciations of two kinds expressed by the study programmes: strong appreciation for the quality of the

reports on the one hand and critical comments about poorly documented findings and recommendations on the other.

- 12 The study programmes and the panel members equally appreciate **the possibility to react on the draft report of the panel**. The difference in opinion is situated in **the appreciation for the way how panels change the report, based on the comments of the programmes**, as the study programmes give a neutral score for the related statement; (mean 5.09, median 5). Panel members value that quality of some of the remarks made by the study programme on the draft report rather low (mean 6.68, median 7). The focus group discussions show that the study programmes quite often find that the panel does not change that much in the report, based on the programme's comments. Panel members report that some responses from institutions are a plea for a consistent upgrading of the scores, without substantiating the reasons for the request. Some responses from institutions and study programmes have been longer than the actual report. The panels, as well as the study programmes ask for additional guidelines with respect to acceptable comments to the draft reports. This ought to be explored in the near future.
- 13 Study programmes report that it is often unclear to them how **parallel panels have discussed the alignment of opinions and judgements expressed in their reports** (mean 5.62, median 6). Panel members show a diversity in their response: some panel members seem to have no clear view on how their chairs have coordinated and discussed crucial issues with respect to making sound and consistent judgments and recommendations in the various panels (mean 6.43, median 6.5); while the majority of the panel members (75%, n = 25) are satisfied about the coordination. Study programmes grade the **comparability of judgments by parallel panels** low (mean 4.16, median 5). The panel members grade the same subject with a mean value of 6.14 and a median of 6. Seven chairs involved in parallel panels show a moderate appreciation for the coordination among the different parallel panels (mean 6.71, median 6). VLUHR QA is aware of this difficulty and already has planned an analysis of various models to approach parallel panels in 2014.
- 14 Panel members are quite positive about the **possibilities embedded in the assessment system to pronounce the distinct profile of the study programme** (mean 7.23), while the study programmes are less enthusiastic about this (mean 5.47).



## **ANNEX 5**

Follow-up of the previous peer review

| <b>ESG 2.1 – Use of internal quality assurance procedures</b>        |                |  |
|--|----------------|--|
| VLIR   | Fully complies | No suggestions   |
| VLHORA   | Complies       | No suggestions   |
| Follow-up  |                | In the development process of the new assessment and accreditation framework, Part I of the ESG has been taken into account.   |
| <b>ESG 2.2 – Development of external quality assurance processes</b> |                |  |
| VLIR   | Fully complies | The panel recommends a stronger involvement of stakeholders. This could be realised for instance by the formation of a specific advisory board or steering committee for the VLIR QAU, with sufficient representation of stakeholders. The panel recommends viewing stakeholders as much broader than solely employers and students; parents, trade unions, teachers, schools, guidance centres, should also be taken into account.  |
| VLHORA   | Complies       | Whilst the panel considers that VLHORA complies with standard 2.2, it recommends that constructive approaches to wider engagement with the process of embedding the master programmes of university colleges into research are sought, particularly with the rather short timescale within which the process is due to be completed.   |
| Follow-up  |                | The establishment of VLUHR QA, the VLUHR QA Board and the VLUHR QA Advisory Committee guarantee a broader stakeholder involvement.<br>VLHORA has undertaken the following actions in order to meet the recommendations of the panel:<br>- The academic bachelor and master programmes offered by the university colleges are in the process of converting into full academic programmes. These programmes must fulfil the academic standards by the end of the academic year 2012-2013. In the transitional period, the assessment of these programmes must take into account the potential interconnection between education and research. NVAO described the transition and the impact on the evaluation and accreditation in its accreditation framework that is an annex of the Manual for the external quality assurance in Flemish Higher Education.<br>- In order to ensure that the panel has sufficient information about the progress of the transition, VLHORA determined in detail which information is required in the self-evaluation report. The adaptation was discussed with the institutions on the one hand and with VLIR and NVAO on the other hand.<br>- The panel members who assessed the programmes in transition in 2008 were invited to discuss the profile of research of the university colleges and to specify which elements will be taken into account to assess the potential to fulfil the academic standards by 2012-2013.<br>- The results were used to draw up a guideline for the panels. The guideline was discussed first with the Working Group QA of VLHORA and was afterwards finalized after discussion with NVAO and VLIR.<br>In November 2009, NVAO drew up a guideline for the accreditation of these programmes. In January 2010, VLHORA integrated the guideline of NVAO and her own guideline in one document that is available on the website (dutch version). The assessment panels receive the guideline, which is amply discussed during the kick-off-meetings of the panels. VLHORA points out that the focus gradually shifts from the potential interconnection between education and research to the actual interconnection towards the end of the assessment cycle.<br>Since the start of the academic year 2013-2014 these study programs are integrated in the universities. |

| ESG 2.3 - Criteria for decisions    |   |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| VILIR                               | <p>Programmes are assessed on the basis of 6 themes, 21 aspects, 50+ criteria and 100+ points of attention. The panel considers this to be a very elaborate framework and also as not quite in line with the character of a peer review. Care should be taken that the QA process does not develop into a more or less mechanical audit process where long lists of criteria are ticked off. Whatever the number of criteria, it should be clear before the start of the process which criteria will (primarily) be used by the panel. It appears that sometimes panels make a selection of „points of attention“, but this is only communicated after the programmes have drawn up their self-evaluation report (but before the assessment visits). These „points of attention“ are not to be viewed or used as separate evaluation criteria, but any confusion about their status should be avoided by clarifying more explicitly to the study programmes under evaluation that the „points of attention“ are not meant to be evaluation criteria themselves.</p> <p>The position of the „master after master“ (Flemish: manama) programmes should be clarified; the development of specific criteria for assessment seems desirable. Furthermore, extra care should be taken to avoid that Manama programmes suffer from inadequate clustering in the assessment process. Review panels draw up a „referential framework“ (a discipline-specific frame of reference) as a concretisation of the theme „Aims and objectives of the programme“ of the NVAO accreditation framework. This referential framework is presented to the programmes before the visits, but after submission of their self-evaluation reports. The panel understands that it is difficult to do everything sequentially (as the duration of the total process is already substantial) but it would be preferable for the programmes to have the referential framework at their disposal earlier so as to be able to use it such (as a frame of reference) in the process of writing the self-evaluation report.</p> |
| VILHORA                             | No suggestions.   |
| Follow-up                           | <p>The assessment framework has been simplified. Study programmes are evaluated on three generic quality standards. The number of master after master programmes has been reduced. It is clarified that these programmes have to fulfil the same standards as other master's programmes.</p> <p>A discipline-specific learning outcomes framework has been introduced. In contrary to the previous system, this framework is to be developed by all involved study programmes in preparation of the external assessment.</p>  |
| ESG 2.4 - Processes fit for purpose |   |
| VILIR                               | The entire process, from initial preparation until the final accreditation decision can take up to three years. In a sense this leads to a system that produces „historical“ decisions. This has to do with several factors, some of which (like the clustered reviews) should not be discarded lightly while others (a very long process of panel formation, submitting accreditation applications late) might be reconsidered.  |
| VILHORA                             | Within the legal framework in which VLHORA has to operate it is clear that the QA system 'works', however the panel recommends that VLHORA and its various key stakeholders reflect further on, and identify more clearly, the aims and objectives that it is seeking to achieve through its processes. This will be important as it moves into a further period of change with the amalgamation of VLHORA with VILIR.  |
| Follow-up                           | The length of the total process has been reduced. The length between inauguration meeting and publication has been reduced to 1 year. Also the accreditation should be provided faster after the publication of the assessment report. Objectives of the system and the organization have been defined explicitly.  |

| ESG 2.5 - Reporting |                        |   |
|---------------------|------------------------|---|
| VLIJIR              | Fully complies         | The panel strongly recommends making the relevant information in the panel reports more readily available to prospective students and other stakeholders. The VLIJIR QAU has drawn up a communication plan for this purpose. The panel recommends that this plan be executed. However, the panel is not recommending the construction of ranking tables based on the information.   |
| VLHORA              | Substantially complies | The panel recommends that VLHORA consider the introduction of a short summary, which would be a useful instrument for students and the interested public to obtain easy access to the most important findings about a specific programme.   |
| Follow-up           |                        | The issue of the readability of the assessment reports, is met in the new assessment round with the introduction of a summary as a standard element of each assessment report.<br>VLUHR QA is aware of the importance of communication, hence the establishment of a permanent working group Marketing and Communication. This working group discussed the framework of the summary. Follow up of the usefulness of the framework and exchange of experiences is scheduled for the staff meetings. Furthermore the satisfaction of the study programmes and the panels concerning the summaries is surveyed in the questionnaires. VLUHR QA plans to discuss the information value of the summaries in the annual meeting with VVS and with the Advisory Committee, where VVS and the social partners are represented.<br>With communication as a strategic goal, VLUHR QA emphasises furthermore its importance for the organization. Two operational goals are defined. VLUHR QA will develop a communication policy and will take into account the communication plan that VLIJIR QAU made, based on an analysis of the expectations of students, parents and student advisory organizations. In the context of the merger of VLIJIR's and VLHORA's QA activities, VLUHR QA joined this project. The Boards of VLIJIR and VLHORA however decided to wait for the new accreditation round 2013-2020. The second operational goal concerns the publication of the results of the reviews. For 2014 two actions are planned, namely a policy for press releases and the preparation of a seminar. |

| ESG 2.6 - Follow-up procedures |                        |  |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|--|
| VLIJIR                         | Fully complies         | Improvement of the quality of programmes is a central purpose of the system. It is evident that such improvements are taking place, but primarily at the discretion of the faculties or universities. Given the emphasis of all parties on the improvement function, one would expect some form of (external) monitoring of improvement, which is not the case. The panel recommends remedying this. One possibility, which does not exclude others, would be to give VLIJIR QAU a role in this.   |
| VLHORA                         | Substantially complies | The review panel finds that these external measures are a suitable replacement for a specific and predetermined VLHORA follow up procedure. However a clearly defined follow-up procedure within the quality-assurance procedures of VLHORA is missing and thus the panel comes to the conclusion that VLHORA substantially but not completely complies with ESG standard 2.6. As a consequence the panel recommends that VLHORA introduces a clearly defined, predetermined follow-up procedure   |
| Follow-up                      |                        | In accordance with the Higher Education Codex VLUHR QA is responsible for carrying out external quality assessments of study programmes in higher education. The follow up of the results of the assessments is a responsibility of the higher education institutions.<br>In 2009, the quality assurance units of VLIJIR and VLHORA discussed with representatives from the higher education institutions whether additional follow-up measures would be useful. The higher education institutions clearly indicated that they don't see a need for additional follow-up.<br>The previous peer review panel suggested VLHORA to analyse the annual reports higher education institutions submit to the Flemish Government. Based on an analysis of the publicly available annual reports, it is clear that institutions report on the follow-up of assessments, but the level of detail doesn't allow for a useful analysis on study programme level for VLUHR QA. |

| <b>ESG 2.7 - Periodic reviews</b> |                |   |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|---|
| VLIR                              | Fully complies | No suggestions.   |
| VLHORA                            | Complies       | The panel considered a cycle of eight year to be somewhat on the long side, particularly in comparison with other practices in Europe. This view was also shared by some of the interviewees but as the cycle is predefined by law the question was not investigated any further. |
| Follow-up                         |                | The Flemish Government has decided that in the current assessment round the length of the cycle stays eight years. It is foreseen that in a next round, the length of an assessment cycle will become six years.  |

| <b>ESG 2.8 - System-wide analyses</b> |                        |   |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------|---|
| VLIR                                  | Substantially complies | The VLIR QAU has a wealth of information about university programmes at its disposal. That could and should be put to descriptive and analytical use. The VLIR QAU has developed plans to compile broader analyses. The panel recommends that these plans be realized.  |
| VLHORA                                | Complies               | No suggestions  |
| Follow-up                             |                        | On a system-level, VLUHR QA writes and presents occasionally papers in which it analyses aspects of the QA system on a system-wide level. VLUHR QA created a working group to analyse options to further disclose the results of external assessments. Next to initiatives to disclose the individual reports better, also an analysis of both suggestions for improvement and best practices is planned. Suggestions for improvement have always been summarised in the reports. Best practices will be described and recorded in a database to make them more accessible for further system-wide analyses. The development of this database is part of the VLUHR QA action plan for 2014. |

| <b>ESG 3.1 - Use of external QA procedures for higher education</b> |                |   |
|---|----------------|---|
| VLIR  | Fully complies | No suggestions  |
| VLHORA  | Complies       | No suggestions  |
| Follow-up   |                | The procedures haven been adapted, in order to be in line with the new accreditation framework. |

| <b>ESG 3.2 – Official status</b> |                |  |
|----------------------------------|----------------|--|
| VLIIR                            | Fully complies | No suggestions   |
| VILHORA                          | Complies       | No suggestions   |
| Follow-up                        |                | The Flemish Government has transferred the competence to organize external study programme assessments from VLIIR and VILHORA to VLUHR QA. |

| <b>ESG 3.3 – Activities</b> |                |   |
|-----------------------------|----------------|---|
| VLIIR                       | Fully complies | No suggestions  |
| VILHORA                     | Complies       | No suggestions  |
| Follow-up                   |                | External study programme assessments are the core activity of VLUHR QA. |

| <b>ESG 3.4 – Resources</b> |                |  |
|----------------------------|----------------|--|
| VLIIR                      | Fully complies | No suggestions   |
| VILHORA                    | Complies       | No suggestions   |
| Follow-up                  |                | Based on the evaluation of the workload mentioned under 2.2 Structure and resources and the feedback of the first assessments within the new accreditation system, VLUHR QA will evaluate the current budget in fall 2014. |

| <b>ESG 3.5 – Mission statement</b> |                        |  |
|------------------------------------|------------------------|--|
| VLIIR                              | Fully complies         | The VLIIR QAU has described adequately what it does, but has no explicit statement about what it wants to achieve. In the Self-Evaluation Report, the intention is stated to formulate a true mission statement. The panel agrees that this certainly should be done. The Unit definitively has an expertise and overview that certainly warrants a broader contribution to the development of QA than only via its coordination function.   |
| VILHORA                            | Substantially complies | The review panel recommends that VILHORA review its mission statement and include a description of the purposes, goals and objectives of its specific QA roles, as well as of the relationship with its relevant stakeholders and society.   |
| Follow-up                          |                        | As indicated in the self-evaluation report VLUHR QA has developed a mission and vision statement that holds explicit and clear goals and objectives as part of a broader strategic exercise to define the profile and the ambitions of VLUHR QA. A bottom-up development process has led to the mission statement as it stands. A working group consisting of staff members drafted several proposals and several follow-up meetings were held with the whole QA team. Based on this exercise, the management team subsequently finalised the mission and vision statement. These statements have been discussed with the VLUHR QA Board and the VLUHR QA Advisory Committee. The VLUHR Board adopted the mission statement on 12th February 2014. The final statement is published on the VLUHR QA website. |

| ESG 3.6 - Independence |   |
|------------------------|---|
| VLIR                   | <p>The VLIR QAU is sufficiently independent. There is however a case for enhancing unambiguous operational independence without detracting from the VLIR's formal responsibility for the execution of the external QA in any way.</p> <p>Due to the intended merger of the VLIR and VLHORA the original plans to create an „operational bureau“ have been postponed. The panel would suggest that preparations continue so that the new structures can be implemented at the moment of the merger; there should be a clear implementation plan.</p> <p>The panel finally stresses that the „degree“ of independence must be wisely chosen to prevent loss of „ownership“ by the university sector. The ambition to engage more independently in policy preparation processes should be handled cautiously (Self-Evaluation Report, p. 36).</p> <p>There is no doubt about the independence of the panels. Although the process of panel formation is not entirely transparent, the panel considers the many safeguards that are built in as adequate. It is recommended though to make the process entirely transparent. One way to achieve this could be by making the VLIR QAU primarily responsible for the panel formation. Development of a pool of panel members by the VLIR QAU would also enhance possibilities for training panel members, and might also enlarge the number of international peers. This would not necessarily have to exclude faculties from the possibility of nominating candidates.</p> <p>A specific problem seems to be the availability of student panel members. The concept of a pool could be used here as well. The panel feels that it is not necessary for a student member to be enrolled for exactly the same programme as is under review. It would be sufficient if it is a related programme. This would enlarge the number of students that are available.</p> |
| VLHORA                 | <p>The review panel suggests that although the system is predefined by law and seems to work rather well, independence would be more secure if there were greater involvement of the external stakeholders in the different bodies of VLHORA. The review panel commends the establishment of the Advisory Board but recommends the introduction of a VLIR/VLHORA steering committee with external stakeholders as members. Also the review panel is of the opinion that the division between VLHORA as an umbrella organization and VLHORA the QA agency should be more explicit and be more clearly reflected in the statutes of VLHORA.</p>   |
| Follow-up              | <p>From 2009 on, the Flemish Government requested VLIR and VLHORA to bring their QA activities together in one organization, VLUHR. VLUHR therefore has been formally established by the Flemish universities, university colleges and associations on 20th December 2010. The operational implementation took until 2013 because of differences in the positions of the VLIR and VLHORA Boards on the strengthened cooperation and on the structure and the leadership of VLUHR and its QA unit.</p> <p>As soon as VLUHR QA was established, it created the independent VLUHR QA Board. This Board, consisting of seven national and international QA experts, took over decisions on the operations of VLUHR QA from the VLHORA Board and creates thus additional guarantees for the independent processes of VLUHR QA. The new structure fully separates the evaluation activities of the agency.</p> <p>In 2013 the operational integration of the two QA units was finalized under the leadership of a newly hired director QA.</p> <p>The higher education institutions, students and social partners are involved in the activities of VLUHR QA through their representation on the QA Advisory Committee. The QA Advisory Committee is made up of 16 representatives of higher education institutions, 2 student representatives and 3 representatives of the social partners.</p>  |

| <b>ESG 3.7 - External QA criteria and processes used by the agencies</b> |                |   |
|--|----------------|---|
| VLIR   | Fully complies | No suggestions.   |
| VLHORA   | Complies       | Whilst in a strict sense VLHORA does not have a follow-up procedure within its own activities it is the panel's view that the overall QA / legal framework in which VLHORA operates does provide an equivalent, and there is thus compliance with ESG 3.7. The panel recommends however that the annual reporting by the university colleges to the Committee is in some way integrated within VLHORA information gathering, thus 'closing the loop' more explicitly with regard to this standard.                  |
| Follow-up  |                | Based on an analysis of the publicly available annual reports, it is clear that institutions report on the follow-up of assessments, but the level of detail doesn't allow for a useful analysis on study programme level for VLUHR QA. The quality assurance units of VLIR and VLHORA discussed in 2009 with representatives from the higher education institutions whether additional follow-up measures would be useful. The institutions clearly indicated that they don't see a need for additional follow-up. |

| <b>ESG 3.8 - Accountability procedures</b> |                        |   |
|--|------------------------|---|
| VLIR                                       | Fully complies         | In general, the internal QA relies for a substantial part on relatively „soft“ instruments; is largely informal. Given the scale and the number of key persons and parties involved, this is feasible. The panel however, would welcome a more systematic approach: periodic reviews of the processes, an annual action plan et cetera. The panel regards the use of the electronic survey as a useful addition in this regard. The internal evaluation process of the Unit should also take stakeholders' views more into account.   |
| VLHORA                                     | Substantially complies | VLHORA clearly has procedures for its own accountability in place. The review panel finds that internal accountability is provided through different measures (surveys, IQA) but for full external accountability, although VLHORA is developing new processes (appeal system, advisory board) the structures are not in place yet and therefore full accountability is still to be achieved. The newly established Advisory Board is a first step but the review panel feels that VLHORA could and should consider being more open to external viewpoints. The panel is of the opinion that VLHORA would find it useful to reflect on the wider expectations of accountability, and identify the specific roles and responsibilities of each stage in its procedures. The simple question – 'Who is responsible for the VLHORA recommendation to NVAO?' did not meet with a single (or simple) answer from all involved in the various activities. Because of the above the panel finds that at this moment VLHORA is substantially, but not completely, in compliance with ESG 3.8. |
| Follow-up                                  |                        | Following its establishment as a new organization, VLUHR QA has developed its internal quality assurance system.  |