

***Report of the committee of the review of
The VLIR Quality Assurance Unit***

FINAL VERSION MAY 2009

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1. Executive summary

1.1 Introduction

The Quality Assurance Unit of the Flemish Interuniversity Council¹ (henceforth VLIR-QAU or Unit) is, by legislation, charged with the coordination of the periodic assessment of university programmes within the framework of an accreditation system. Furthermore, the VLIR-QA Unit is, by legislation – together with VLHORA – also charged with the coordination of the periodic assessment of academic programmes, organised by colleges of higher education in cooperation with universities, within the framework of an association.

The VLIR-QAU is a member of ENQA and its membership regulations stipulate a periodic review of the agency.

This report contains the assessment of the VLIR-QAU by an independent panel of quality assurance experts.

1.2 Review process

First initiatives for an external review date from mid-2006. Initially a joint review was considered, together with the quality assurance unit of the sister organisation VLHORA (Flemish Council of University Colleges), but later both parties decided for separate reviews. In September 2007, the initial communication with the ENQA secretariat took place. On the basis of consultation with the ENQA secretariat, a choice was made for an independent quality assurance consultant to coordinate the review and to act as secretary of the review panel. In April 2008, a consultant was contracted. At that time the process of drafting the Self-Evaluation Report had already started. This was finished in the autumn of 2008. In the meantime panel members were approached, again after consultation with ENQA.

A preparatory visit to the VLIR-QAU by chairman and secretary took place on 16th January, 2009. A programme of about ten on-site meetings was drawn up, involving about 60 people including the chairman and members of the VLIR Board, VLIR managing director, VLIR-QAU staff members and administrative staff, faculty and institutional quality assessment coordinators, VLHORA representatives, representatives of the student organization, Ministry (administration), former panel members, Higher Education Recognition Commission and NVAO (Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders). All meetings were held in the VLIR office in Brussels from 3rd February up to and including 5th February, 2009.

1.3 Evidence

The VLIR-QAU submitted (the English version of) its Self-Evaluation Report to the panel on 5th November, 2008. An update to the Self-Evaluation Report was received by the panel on 28th January, 2009. This was accompanied by a short note concerning the Unit's role in the quality assurance system.

¹ In Dutch: Cel Kwaliteitszorg van de Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad.

Both the report and update were considered by the committee, as well as various other documents that were available to the committee in advance of and during the site visit. The panel received an evaluative document from a faculty coordinator that was not able to attend the meeting and also received two samples from follow-up reports.

The site visit provided further oral evidence.

The panel considers the Self-Evaluation Report as very open and informative, with attention for shortcomings and possible tensions.

The panel was hosted with great hospitality and flexibility and received every support. All the meetings were open and informative and there was no indication that any information or opinion was being held back.

1.4 Conclusions

Compliance with the ESG (Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area)

In the light of the documentary and oral evidence, the review panel is satisfied that, in the performance of its functions, the VLIR Quality Assurance Unit is in compliance with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. The Panel, therefore, recommends to the Board of ENQA that the VLIR Quality Assurance Unit should have its Full Membership of ENQA confirmed for a further period of five years.

1.5 Recommendations

The committee has formulated a number of recommendations.

The (implementation of the) recommendations are not conditional for the assessment of the VLIR-QAU as compliant with the ESG.

The recommendations are relevant to the functioning of the VLIR-QAU; in most instances, however, implementing them will also require decisions and/or efforts from other parties.

The recommendations are the following:

- Enhance stakeholder involvement.
- Improve readability and accessibility of reports for a broader readership.
- Monitor follow-up activities.
- Clarify the position of 'Master after master' programmes in the assessment procedure.
- Reduce the number of themes, aspects, criteria and points of attention in the procedures and always be transparent about the criteria used.
- Take care to have the 'referential framework' (a discipline-specific frame of reference) ready early in the assessment process.
- Shorten the duration of the entire process.
- Draft a proper mission statement.
- Produce system-wide analyses.
- Improve the internal accountability procedures.
- Strengthen the (operational) independence of the VLIR-QAU.
- Consider changing the selection procedure for the review panels.

2. Introduction

2.1 Outline of the review process

2.1.1 VLIR Quality Assurance Unit

The VLIR-QAU is, by law, charged with the coordination of periodic assessment of university programmes within the framework of a bi-national accreditation system (a joint system of Flanders and The Netherlands).

The VLIR-QAU is part of a three-tier system of quality assurance and accreditation. In this system the VLIR-QAU occupies the middle layer, in between the individual universities (and their programmes) on the one hand and the NVAO on the other hand. Each layer has - in principle - its own autonomy and well-delineated responsibility:

- The individual universities are responsible for the development and implementation of internal quality assurance procedures. Within this framework, programmes are in charge of their own self-evaluation processes. The programmes draw up a self-evaluation report as the basis for an external peer review.
- The VLIR-QAU is responsible for the organisation of external assessments of programmes (with an emphasis on improvement) and the publication of the assessment reports of assessment panels consisting of external peers.
- Finally, the NVAO is in charge of the formal accreditation of the programmes which have been assessed by the VLIR-QAU, and focuses on accountability.

2.1.2 Purposes of the review

The VLIR is a member of ENQA. Membership of this organisation requires a five-yearly external assessment of the VLIR's activities in the field of external quality assurance. The goal of such a review is to check whether the VLIR complies, as a quality assurance agency, with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*.² The assessment should be based on a self-evaluation report and a site visit by an independent international panel of experts.

Additionally, the VLIR-QAU regards the review as a suitable opportunity to conduct a critical evaluation of its role in the quality assurance and accreditation system; especially in the light of proposed changes in the system that are currently in discussion.

2.1.3 Committee and review method

The first initiatives for an external review date from mid-2006. Initially a joint review, together with the quality assurance unit of the VLHORA was considered, but later a decision was made for separate reviews. In September 2007, the initial communication with the ENQA secretariat took place. On the basis of consultation with the ENQA secretariat, a choice was made

² Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2007, Helsinki, 2nd edition, 2007

for an independent quality assurance consultant to coordinate the review and to act as secretary for the review panel. In April 2008 smets+ hover+ adviseurs was contracted for that purpose. At that same time the process of drafting the Self-Evaluation Report had already started. This was finished in the autumn of 2008. In the meantime panel members were approached, again after consultation with ENQA. A list of panel members is recorded in annexe 6.1. All panel members have signed a declaration of independence.

A preparatory visit to VLIR-QAU by the chairman and the secretary took place on 16th January, 2009. A programme of about ten on-site meetings was drawn up involving about 60 people including the chairman and members of the VLIR Board, VLIR managing director, VLIR-QAU staff members and administrative staff, faculty and institutional quality assessment coordinators, VLHORA representatives, representatives of the student organization, Ministry (administration), former panel members, the Higher Education Recognition Commission and NVAO. All meetings were held in the VLIR office in Brussels from 3rd February up to and including 5th February, 2009.

The VLIR-QAU submitted (the English version of) its Self-Evaluation Report to the panel on 5th November, 2008. An update to the Self-Evaluation Report was received by the review panel on 28th January, 2009. This was accompanied by a short note concerning the Unit's role in the quality assurance system. The report and update were considered by the committee, as well as various other documents that were available to the committee before and during the site visit.

The panel considers the Self-Evaluation Report to be very informative and sufficiently self-critical. However, the panel also noticed a certain preoccupation with system questions (concerning the division of responsibilities between the three tiers in the system and with the current discussion about possible changes to the system). Understandable as this may be, its relevancy for the review of the Unit against the ESG is limited.

The site visit provided further oral evidence. The panel received an evaluative document from a faculty coordinator that was not able to attend the meeting and also received two samples of follow-up reports. The meetings were very informative and were characterized by a very open discussion. Furthermore, during the visit, the panel was very pleasantly hosted by the VLIR and had full access to documentation.

After the site visit the secretary wrote a draft report. This was submitted for commentary to the panel members. Based on the various comments a new version of the report was drafted and sent to the VLIR-QAU for factual verification on March 29, 2009. The reaction of the VLIR QAU was received on April 27, 2009. Chairman and secretary thereupon finalized the report, which was submitted to the VLIR-QAU May 15, 2009.

2.2 Outline of the report

The panel first presents a description of the VLIR-QAU in chapter 3.

In chapter 4 the panel presents its findings regarding the VLIR-QAU's compliance with the ESG.

In chapter 5 the panel formulates conclusions and recommendations.

Finally some annexes are added.

3. VLIR Quality Assurance Unit

3.1 History

The VLIR has been the consultative and advisory body of the Flemish universities since 1976. Since 1991, a separate quality assessment unit within the VLIR has organized the programme assessments, which have been assigned by law to the universities as part of their responsibility for the internal and external quality assurance of the programmes.

The VLIR-QAU is now part of a three-tier system of quality assurance and accreditation. In this system the VLIR-QAU occupies the middle layer, in between the individual universities (and their programmes) on the one hand, and the NVAO on the other hand. Each layer has its own autonomy and well-delineated responsibility:

- The individual universities are responsible for the development and implementation of internal quality assurance procedures. Within this framework, programmes are in charge of their own self-evaluation processes. The programmes draw up a self-evaluation report as the basis for an external peer review.
- The VLIR-QAU is responsible for the organisation of external assessments of programmes (with an emphasis on improvement) and the publication of the assessment reports of assessment panels consisting of external peers.
- Finally, the NVAO is in charge of the formal accreditation of the programmes which have been assessed by the VLIR-QAU, and focuses on accountability.

This three-tier system was introduced in Flanders in 2003. The legislative basis for the system is twofold.

- The Universities Act (1991) assigns responsibility for the internal and external quality assurance of education to the universities themselves. Thus each university is responsible for internal quality assurance within itself as an institution. Additionally, each university is required to submit its programmes for an external assessment on an eight-year cycle and to act on the findings and results of this external assessment. The task of organising these external assessments has been entrusted to the VLIR, which has been the consultative and advisory body of the universities since 1976. Within the VLIR a Quality Assurance Unit has been set up to carry out this role. The external quality assurance system serves a twofold purpose: it is intended to help improve the quality of university education, and the universities are required to account for the way in which they address quality and quality assurance in the context of a programme.
- The Higher Education Act (*Decreet betreffende de herstructurering van het hoger onderwijs in Vlaanderen, 2003*) adds a number of important elements. The external quality assurance system, that was mainly designed with a view to introducing improvements, underwent a thorough modification with the introduction of the external quality assurance system. Alongside the interest in making improvements, the programmes were now also required to demonstrate their 'generic' (or basic) quality

as a condition for accreditation, to be based on an external peer assessment. Flanders and the Netherlands decided to have their higher education programmes jointly accredited, and to this end they established the NVAO.

The 2003 Higher Education Act continues the VLIR-QAU's responsibility for coordinating the external assessments. The assessment panels from then on judge the programmes on the basis of the six 'themes' (covering 21 'aspects') listed in the NVAO's accreditation framework.

After the publication of the assessment report, the higher education institution submits an accreditation application to the NVAO. The NVAO's decision-making structure is binary: either the programme receives accreditation or it does not. If the accreditation decision about a programme is negative, the institution's board may submit an application to the Flemish government for a temporary recognition. A positive accreditation decision has an eight-year period of validity. In 2012, all bachelor's and master's programmes will be assessed for the first time according to this new system.

Currently, changes to the system are under discussion, which may lead to the implementation of a revised system in Flanders from 2013. The proposed system would consist of institutional audits in combination with a system of limited (in respect to the current situation) programme evaluations. This discussion of course has no direct relevance with regard to the review of the VLIR-QAU at this moment, but understandably part of the discussion within the meetings pertained to the current policy discussions.

3.2 Tasks

The VLIR-QAU is responsible for the coordination of the joint external assessments of the academic programmes organised by the universities. Programmes are not reviewed in isolation but always together in a cluster of related programmes, enabling a comparative approach. Some unique study programmes however are assessed individually.

Moreover, the VLIR-QAU is responsible (together with its sister organisation VLHORA) for the coordination of the external assessments of the academic programmes organised by university colleges in the context of an association³ and for the academic programmes jointly organised by universities and university colleges.

The VLIR seeks, in the context of external quality assurance, to contribute to the monitoring and improvement of the quality of university education by carrying out external educational assessments.

³ Since 2003, university colleges and universities have been grouped together in five *associations* which are organised around a university. An important function of the associations is the optimisation of the collaboration between university colleges and universities with a view to the adoption of academic standards in the two-cycle education (the four and five-year programmes), i.e. embedding this education in scientific research, at the university colleges.

The Quality Assurance Unit fulfils this role by organising, on a regular basis, educational assessment visits, carried out by panels of independent and authoritative peers.

The Unit also has the task of supporting the VLIR Quality Assurance and Accreditation Working Group. This Working Group discusses quality assurance-related problems, carries out policy preparation work and formulates formal opinions for the administrative bodies of the VLIR with regard to external quality assurance.

3.3 Status

The role of the VLIR-QAU is firmly established in the legislation. Article 57bis, § 2ter of the Higher Education Act clearly establishes the role of the VLIR as a quality assessment body. It is also stipulated that the VLIR is responsible for drawing up an Educational Assessment Visits Guide (*Decreet betreffende de herstructurering van het hoger onderwijs in Vlaanderen*, art. 93, § 3).

The role of the Higher Education Recognition Committee (an independent external body that checks the independence of proposed members of review panels) is also established in the legislation (*Decreet betreffende de herstructurering van het hoger onderwijs in Vlaanderen*, art. 93, § 3bis).

3.4 Mission

The VLIR Quality Assurance Unit has defined its mission ('Opdrachtsverklaring') as follows:

"In the context of the statutory role assigned to the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR), VLIR's Quality Assurance Unit is responsible for the coordination of the joint external assessments of the academic programmes organised by the universities. Moreover, the VLIR Quality Assurance Unit is responsible together with VLHORA for the coordination of the external assessments of the academic programmes organised by university colleges in the context of an association and for the academic programmes jointly organised by universities and university colleges. The VLIR seeks, in the context of external quality assurance, to contribute to the monitoring and improvement of the quality of university education by carrying out external educational assessments.

The Quality Assurance Unit fulfils this role by organising on a regular basis educational assessment visits, carried out by panels of independent and authoritative peers. Their findings are published in public reports. The tools used by the Quality Assurance Unit in the execution of its role are supported by research and consultation with its partners.

During the assessment process, the Quality Assurance Unit attaches particular importance in its coordinatory role to:

- monitoring the independence, transparency and consistent execution of the whole process;
- recognising and respecting the individuality and stimulating the engagement of the programmes under assessment;
- ensuring attention for both the accountability and the improvement function of the assessment process.

As tangible end products of the assessment process, the published reports are intended to inform the outside world objectively about the quality of the visited programmes, offer constructive suggestions on improving quality within the programmes and as such constitute the substantive basis for the issue of formal accreditations.” (SER, p. 15-16)”

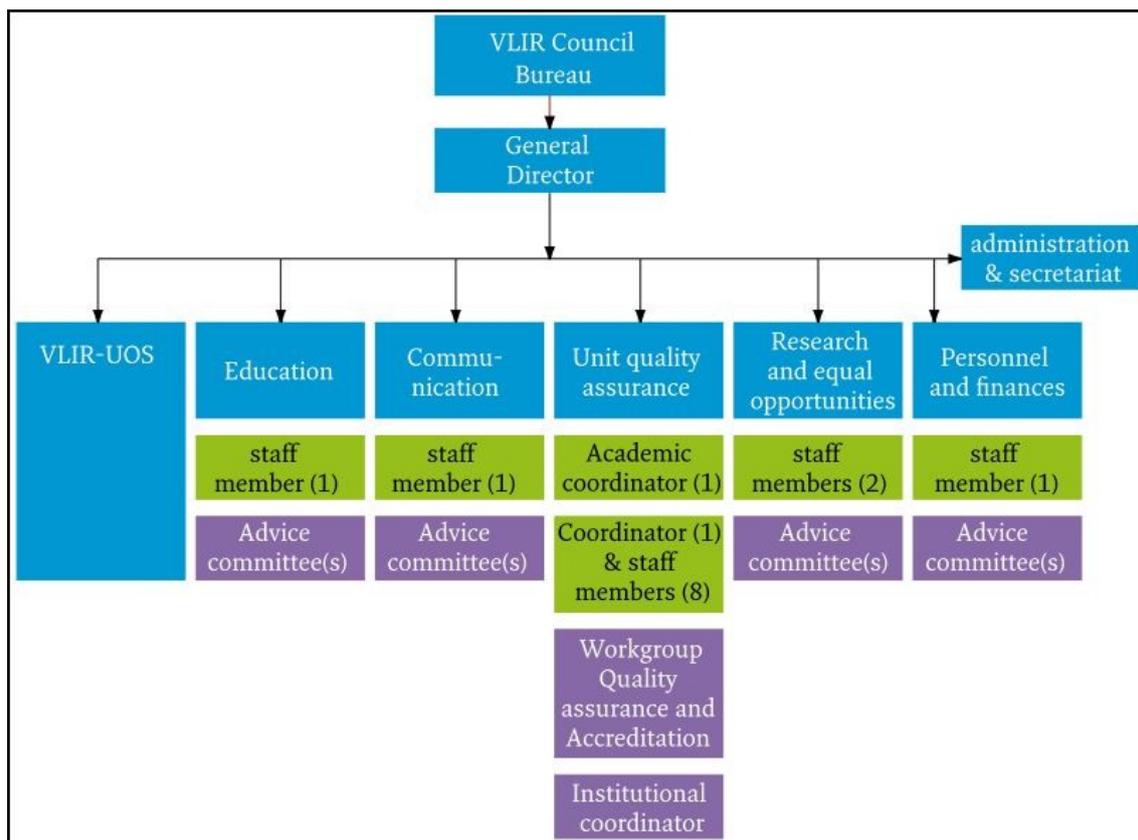
3.5 Organisation

The Bureau and the Board are the VLIR’s two administrative bodies, and cover the fields of internationalisation, communication, educational policy, research policy and equal opportunities, personnel and finance, and quality assurance and accreditation.

The Bureau consists of the six rectors of the Flemish universities. The Board has twelve members, also from all Flemish universities.

The VLIR secretariat had 19 staff members (18 FTEs) on 1 October 2008. See Figure 1 for an organisation chart.

Figure 1: Organisation chart



Within the VLIR secretariat, the number of staff members working on the external quality assurance evaluations has changed from two initially in the early 90s to ten on 1 October 2008.

The VLIR-QAU staff currently consists of:

- Academic coordinator (0,3 FTE). The academic coordinator acts as an advisor, mediates in the event of problems, helps monitor the assess-

ments, runs the meetings to decide on the composition of the assessment panels, inaugurates the assessment panels and chairs the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Working Group.

- Coordinator (1 FTE), responsible for the coordination and supervision of the execution of the programme reviews.
- Eight staff members (8 FTE), who organize the reviews and act as secretary of the panels.
- Two administrative staff (1,5 FTE)

The VLIR-QAU receives a grant for its general functioning and the universities pay for the individual assessments. For 2008 the Unit budgeted a revenue of € 358,020 (general functioning) and € 767,247 (individual assessments), which results in an overall revenue of € 1,125,267. For 2009, the Unit has budgeted € 365.180 (general functioning) and € 954,000 (individual assessments), which results in an overall revenue of € 1,319,180. The budget rise (+17%) is mainly the consequence of the increase in the number of assessments.

4. ESG compliance

In this chapter the panel presents its major findings in the following format:

- Description of the information gathered; making reference to meetings or documentation explored.
- Analysis of that information with respect to each standard.
- Conclusion as to the degree of compliance of the VLIR Quality Assurance Unit is with the ESG.

4.1 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.

4.1.1 Description

In paragraph 3.1 the Flemish system of quality assurance in the universities is sketched. It is a three-tier system:

- Institutional level: the universities establish and maintain an internal system of quality assurance at institutional and programme level.
- Quality assurance agency level: all programmes are periodically reviewed by an independent, external panel; these panel reviews are organised and supported by the VLIR-QAU.
- Accreditation agency level: the reports by the review panels serve as a basis for formal accreditation of the programmes by the NVAO. Accreditation is a prerequisite for state funding of the programme and for degree-awarding power.

A central link between these three tiers is the NVAO accreditation framework, consisting of 6 themes and 21 aspects.⁴ Theme 5 is Internal quality Assurance, consisting of the following three aspects:

- Aspect 5.1. Evaluation results.
- Aspect 5.2. Measures for improvement.
- Aspect 5.3. Involvement of staff, students, alumni and the professional field.

This internal system of quality assurance serves in part to facilitate the drawing up of a reliable and transparent self-evaluation report faculty coordinators and their teams with respect to the themes and aspects of the NVAO accreditation framework.

The framework is also the frame of reference for the independent panels that review the programmes.

⁴ The accreditation framework has a legal basis; see article 58, Higher Education Act (Decreet betreffende de herstructurering van het hoger onderwijs in Vlaanderen), April 2003.

The review procedure (worked out in great detail in the *Educational Assessment Visits Guide* that was developed by the VLIR-QAU in cooperation with its sister organisation VLHORA) pays considerable attention to Theme 5. Amongst others, there will always be meetings with those responsible for quality assurance at central, faculty and programme level to gauge the design, functioning and effectiveness of the internal quality assurance procedures on the basis of the description in the self-evaluation report.

Various aspects of the NVAO accreditation framework cover the elements described in ESG, Part 1:

- Standard 1.1 (Policy and procedures for quality assurance) is covered by aspects 5.1 (Evaluation results) and 5.3 (Involvement of staff, students, alumni and the professional field).
- Standard 1.2 (Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards) is covered by aspects 2.1 (Correspondence between the aims and objectives, and the curriculum), 5.1 (Evaluation results) and 5.2 (Measures for improvement).
- Standard 1.3 (Assessment of students) is covered by aspect 2.7 (Learning assessment).
- Standard 1.4 (Quality assurance of teaching staff) is covered by aspect 3.1 (Quality of staff).
- Standard 1.5 (Learning resources and student support) is covered by aspects 2.6 (Coherence of structure and contents), 3.3 (Quantity of staff), 4.1 (Facilities) and 4.2 (Tutoring).
- Standard 1.6 (Information systems) is covered by aspects 2.5 (Workload), 3.3 (Quantity of staff), 5.1 (Evaluation results), 6.1 (Achieved learning outcome) and 6.2 (Study progress).
- Standard 1.7 (Public information) is covered by aspect 1.1 (Level and orientation), 2.7 (Learning assessment), 4.2 (Tutoring).

4.1.2 Analysis

The panel understands that there is a division of responsibilities and authorities in the system of quality assurance. The institutions themselves are responsible for the quality assurance of their programmes (Higher Education Act, art. 93). Because of this formal division of responsibilities the VLIR-QAU (and the review panels that the Unit is coordinating) necessarily take into account the (effectiveness of) the internal quality assurance processes within the institutions. Neither the VLIR-QAU nor the review panels have any responsibility regarding the internal quality assurance processes within the institutions; these reside firmly in the institutions. They do not repeat the various activities of the internal quality assurance; they only review the scope and effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system following the aforementioned three aspects of the NVAO accreditation framework. In the process all standards of ESG Part 1 are taken into account.

4.1.3 Conclusion

The VLIR Quality Assurance Unit fully complies with ESG 2.1.

4.2 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.

4.2.1 Description

At the national system level the aims and objectives of quality assurance processes were determined in the course of the legislative process leading to the current system as laid down in the 2003 Higher Education Act. In this process, the various stakeholders have been consulted.

At the level of the VLIR-QAU, the aims and objectives are recorded in the VLIR-QAU *Educational Assessment Visits Guide*; see Chapter 1, Quality and Quality Assurance Systems and, more specifically concerning the tasks of the VLIR-QAU, paragraph 3.2, Task of the Assessment panel. All the procedures to be used are documented in this guide.

The *Educational Assessment Visits Guide* has been developed on the basis of the NVAO accreditation framework and in consultation with stakeholders.

4.2.2 Analysis

It can clearly be established that, formally and factually, the aims and objectives were determined before the processes themselves were developed, given the fact that the processes and procedures had to be based on the law. Furthermore, the VLIR-QAU has published its procedures.

As to the involvement of 'all those responsible', the panel is satisfied that this is formally the case. However, here, as well as regarding some other standards, the panel feels that serious involvement of stakeholder parties falls somewhat short of what might be expected. For instance, the involvement of stakeholders (other than the universities) in the conceptualisation and update of the *Educational Assessment Visits Guide* was limited. The panel will critically discuss this with regard to standard 4.16 where it is more relevant.

The panel notes that the quality assurance system has in fact two main functions that are defined in the law:

- An improvement function, geared towards a continuous improvement of the relevance, content, learning, assessment and outcomes of programmes.
- An accountability function, whereby accreditation is a condition for funding and for granting degree-awarding power.

The panel learned in the meetings that for the institutions, as well as for the VLIR-QAU, the improvement function definitively comes first. The government representative regarded both functions as important.

It is evident, from the Unit's Self-Evaluation Report and from various meetings that there are sometimes tensions between the two functions. Especially at the start of the system in 2004 there was some apprehension that the openness, necessary for the improvement function, might jeopardize programme accreditation. The improvement function demands self-criticism in the self-evaluation report and requires recommendations by the review

panels and this might be perceived, by the accrediting agency, as substantial shortcomings prohibiting accreditation.

At the start of the new system, this has certainly played a role at times, with the NVAO asking additional questions about the nature of the recommendations and at times even 'redoing' the job of the panel or the VLIR-QAU. The panel's impression is that this is no longer the case other than in exceptional situations. The VLIR-QAU has meanwhile learned to take great care to ensure that the review reports make a clear distinction between the assessments and the motivations for them on the one hand, and suggestions for improvements on the other hand. The panel has understood from NVAO representatives that this nowadays hardly ever gives rise to problems.

Furthermore, it is evident that a positive characteristic of the current system is a great sense of ownership and involvement on the part of the universities (but, as already mentioned, this is less so in the case of other important stakeholders: students, employers and society in general).

4.2.3 Conclusion

The VLIR-QAU fully complies with ESG 2.2.

4.3 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.

4.3.1 Description

The VLIR-QAU does not make any formal decisions as a result of the external peer review of a programme. Given the three-tier system, the formal accreditation decision, based on a review panel's report, is made by the NVAO.

The decisions by the NVAO are demonstrably based on explicit, published criteria that are applied consistently. The panel refers to the conclusion "NVAO fully complies with ESG 2.3" in the *Report of the committee for the review of the Accreditation Organization of The Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO)* (September 2007).

It should be mentioned here that there are two possibilities of appeal, one in the phase before the panel finalises the report and one after the accreditation decision by NVAO.

4.3.2 Analysis

ESG 2.3 does not directly apply to decisions made by the VLIR-QAU; therefore the panel has to take into account the decision making of the NVAO. As the NVAO has recently been reviewed with regard to ESG-compliance, the panel can refer to the (above-mentioned) conclusions of the NVAO review committee.

There is one point that deserves attention concerning the elaboration by the VLIR-QAU of the 21 'aspects' of the formal accreditation framework into more than 50 additional 'criteria' and more than 100 'points of attention'. Strictly speaking, panels need only take the 21 aspects into account. The 50 criteria and 100 points of attentions are supplementary.

In the meeting with panel members the panel learned that panels (at least in a number of cases) make a selection out of the points of attention. This selection is however not communicated to the staff of the programme in review.

To begin with, the panel feels that a combination of 21 aspects, 50 criteria and 100 points of attention is too complex for panel members to handle consistently within the context of a review process. So it is understandable that panels would want to make a selection. This however can negatively affect the transparency of the review.

One particular case in the procedures seems not yet sufficiently regulated; the position of the 'manama' (master after master programmes, or advanced master programmes⁵). There is apparently no clear conception of the position of this master in relation to the 'regular' master. This hinders the assessment process. It was also reported to the panel that it is not easy to classify the master-after-master programmes into sensible clusters.

The meetings did not leave the impression that these circumstances seriously hindered the process-. However, reflection on these issues would seem appropriate.

4.3.3 Conclusion

The VLIR-QAU fully complies with ESG 2.3.

4.4 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.

4.4.1 Description

In short, the quality assurance processes are the following:

- A self-evaluation report prepared by the staff of the faculty to be reviewed.
- A site visit to review the programme by an independent panel consisting of expert peers, at least one student member and an educational expert.
- The use of generic and a discipline-specific criteria, tailored to suit the individual nature of the programmes.
- A public report
- The use of a legally-based accreditation framework.

The VLIR-QAU:

- Develops and maintains the Educational Assessments Visits Guide.

⁵ For admission to a 'manama', the candidate should already have completed another master programme.

- Assists the institutions in their internal quality assurance efforts, and (amongst other things) offers a workshop for programme staff members.
- Offers a thorough briefing for panel members.
- Provides the secretary for the panel.
- Ensures the correct implementation of the agreed procedures.

The purposes, for which these processes are applied, are twofold:

- Improvement.
- Accountability.

4.4.2 Analysis

The guidelines mention some elements of external review processes that not only help to ensure their validity, reliability and usefulness, but also provide a basis for the European dimension of quality assurance. Each of these is recorded below and related to the VLIR-QAU processes.

- *Experts undertaking the external quality assurance activity have appropriate skills and are competent to perform their task.*
The review panel consists mainly of peers from the discipline; one of the panel members is an educational expert. There is always a seat for a student member (but not in all cases a student willing to participate is found). A trained secretary is present to support the panel and to draft the report.
- *Care in the selection of experts.*
Great care is taken in the selection of panel members and to ensure both their expertise and their independence; this will be elaborated in paragraph 4.14.
- *Provision of appropriate briefing or training for experts.*
The VLIR-QAU provides a briefing for the panel members. During the entire process the secretary is present to provide information and explanations where needed. A detailed *Educational Assessment Visits Guide* is available.
- *Use of international experts.*
The use of international experts is considered desirable but is impeded by the fact that the working language must be Dutch and by the (traveling) costs of engaging foreign experts. Therefore, in 2006, it was decided that (because of the costs involved) in general no experts from outside Europe were to be included in the panels. In practice, the international dimension is often fulfilled by Dutch experts.
The government representative expressed the need for international benchmarking of Flemish curricula, which would require the involvement of more foreign peers.
- *Participation of students.*
The presence of one student member in the review panel is compulsory but when a student candidate can't be found, the panel can still deliver a valid report.
- *Review procedures used are sufficient to provide adequate evidence to support the findings and conclusions reached.*
The review procedures as outlined in the *Educational Assessment Visits Guide* are adequate.
- *Use of the self-evaluation/site visit/draft report/published report/follow-up model of review.*

All these steps are clearly present in the way the reviews coordinated by the VLIR-QAU are executed.

- *Institutional improvement and enhancement policies as a fundamental element in the assurance of quality.*

The accreditation system is geared toward both accountability and improvement. The latter function is demonstrably present (all review reports contain recommendations) and was highlighted by all the parties interviewed by the panel.

The whole process is a thorough one, but also takes a very long time. It can take up to three years from the beginning until the final accreditation decision. The first year is used for the start-up (planning and organizing, panel formation, workshops for faculty coordinators, etc.) and for writing the self-evaluation reports. The second year is used for the actual peer visits. As is chosen for a clustered approach in which all similar programmes are reviewed in one process, this takes a relatively long time. In the third year the panel reports on the evaluated study programmes are published (six to nine months after the assessment visits to the study programmes). Finally the accreditation decision can take a long time. Not because the NVAO takes such a long time (as a rule four months), but because the institutions sometimes wait before they submit the accreditation request. Sometimes improvements have already been set up and the institution wants to report these to the NVAO. Actually there is no need for this, as the NVAO takes only the panel report into account and no information about changes and improvements made after the site visit (this is the so called 'snapshot approach' in which the observations made during the site visit are decisive). The result is that accreditation decisions can in fact refer to dated programmes. This does however not substantially affect the usefulness of panel reports for the purpose of programme improvement.

In the Self-Evaluation Report, the VLIR-QAU is strongly in favour of what is called 'snapshot evaluation': the moment of the site visit is the moment of assessment. At that moment a snapshot of the programme is taken. Everything that happens afterwards (including programme improvements) cannot and may not be taken into account by the review panels and the accreditation organisation. Although this is a correct point of view, in practice it implies that within the clustered approach, snapshots of the programmes are taken at different moments (as the various visits are spread over a period) and that the snapshot is – in a sense – 'history' at the time of the accreditation decision.

For the most part the VLIR-QAU is not in a position to speed up the process, because the causes lie within legislative regulations:

- Panel formation is a complex process involving various actors.
- The clustered approach is mandatory.
- Formally it must be the institution that submits a request for an accreditation decisions. It is not the responsibility of the VLIR-QAU to submit the report to the NVAO. In fact once the panel has finalised the report, it is public and NVAO can take note of it, but it cannot take a formal decision as long as there is no formal application for accreditation.

All in all, the panel concludes that the observed shortcomings do not result in non-compliance or partial compliance on the part of the VLIR-QAU. However, steps should be taken to speed up the process and ensure that published material is more up-to-date.

4.4.3 Conclusion

The VLIR-QAU fully complies with ESG 2.4

4.5 ESG 2.5 Reporting

Reports should be published and should be written in a style that 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.

4.5.1 Description

The primary intended readership of the report consists of the universities (with regard to the improvement function) and the NVAO (with regard to the accountability function, i.e. the accreditation decision).

Reports are clearly structured in accordance with the NVAO accreditation framework and contain explicit judgments of the programme per theme and aspect and provide recommendations.

Moreover, as every programme is always reviewed together with similar or related programmes, the reports contain a comparative chapter that includes a comparative score table, in which all programmes are compared on each theme (on a binary scale: satisfactory/unsatisfactory) and aspect (on a skewed four-point scale: unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent). The comparative review is useful for the programmes reviewed, but also for parties such as the government, employers and (prospective) students.

All reports can be downloaded by the general public from the VLIR website: http://www.vlir.be/content1.aspx?url=p_178.htm.

4.5.2 Analysis

The reports are definitively accessible to their intended readership. This could be established by the panel itself and was confirmed in the meetings the panel had with the parties that constitute the intended readership.

That being said, it is also evident that the reports are not written with a broader readership in mind. The reports contain information that is important for students (especially when they select a university to study a given programme), for employers when hiring a graduate and for society at large. However, the reports are not easily accessible to these stakeholders and the VLIR QAU is not actively communicating relevant information. Only recently (as mentioned in the January 2009 update to the Self-Evaluation Report) the VLIR-QAU has devised a communication plan to make relevant information from the review reports available to at least the following target groups: students in the final year of their secondary education, their parents and employers. The panel considers this a welcome and necessary step, because the panel feels there is room for improvement.

This does not imply non-compliance with ESG 2.5, as the standard does not refer to stakeholders parties in general, but to the (formally) intended readership, i.e. the NVAO and the universities.

4.5.3 Conclusion

The VLIR Quality Assurance Unit fully complies with ESG 2.5

4.6 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 that is implemented consistently.

4.6.1 Description

Given the orientation towards the improvement function one would expect to find a clear follow-up procedure. As said before, the review reports always contain recommendations. However, neither the VLIR-QAU nor the NVAO play any role in monitoring the follow-up activities aimed at programme improvement, except that in the next review (which takes place eight years later) the panel will look into the way recommendations have been implemented.

However, it is clear a follow-up does indeed take place. In the meeting with faculty and institutional coordinators, they stressed the fact that they do implement improvements and that they are obliged to report on their follow-up activities one year after the publication of the review report. The panel has received, from one of the institutional coordinators who participated in one of the meetings, two examples of recent follow-up reports. Some universities stated that they organize internal mid-term reviews that monitor the implementation of improvements after the visitation.

Reports of follow-up activities are sometimes added to the review report when this is submitted to the NVAO for accreditation of the programme. However, as noted above, this has no effect on the accreditation decisions, which are solely based on the findings of the panel. The review panel is dissolved after the report is finalised and is not involved in assessing the results of the follow-up procedures.

4.6.2 Analysis

Given the importance that all parties concerned attach to the improvement functions, the follow-up procedures are not very clearly regulated. There can be hardly any doubt that improvement does take place but it was evident that various parties have different views about the extent to which improvement takes place. There is also hardly any monitoring, other than on the basis of the accreditation cycle. However, this does not infringe on compliance with ESG 2.5 as it is firmly established that a follow-up does occur.

In the meetings various suggestions have been made to improve the monitoring of the follow-up process (delegate it to the VLIR-QAU, retain the review panel for this task, let the NVAO take implemented improvement into consideration in the accreditation decision process). None of these seem easily implementable, but this certainly deserves attention as the improvement-orientated benefits of the quality assurance system now seem to be partly underestimated. It is also possible that in some cases the degree of improvement is inadequate. Some form of monitoring at a system level seems desirable.

4.6.3 Conclusion

The VLIR-QAU fully complies with ESG 2.6.

4.7 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.

4.7.1 Description

All programmes in Flemish universities are reviewed every eight years; this is stipulated in the Higher Education Act (*Decreet betreffende de herstructurering van het hoger onderwijs in Vlaanderen, 2003, article 93, § 1*). The review procedures are described in general terms in the Higher Education Act (*Decreet betreffende de herstructurering van het hoger onderwijs in Vlaanderen, 2003, articles 57, 57bis, 58 and 93*). They are described in further detail in the *Educational Assessment Visits Guide*.

4.7.2 Analysis

The periodic reviews are firmly established in the law. All procedures have been clearly described and published in advance. The panel considers the eight year cycle, in combination with the long duration of the whole accreditation process (up to three years) as too long.

4.7.3 Conclusion

The VLIR-QAU fully complies with ESG 2.7.

4.8 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.

4.8.1 Description

An interesting feature of the Flemish system is the so called 'clustered approach': clusters of programmes in the same discipline are reviewed together within one assessment cycle. As a consequence, comparative reviews are possible. Every review report contains a chapter with general considerations and a comparative score table in which all programmes are

compared on each theme (on a binary scale: satisfactory/unsatisfactory) and aspect (on a four-point scale: unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, excellent).

The comparative review is useful for the programmes reviewed, but also for parties such as the government, employers and (prospective) students.

4.8.2 Analysis

The comparative reviews are certainly a valuable resource. They are drawn up by the review panels. Although such reviews could be considered a form of system analysis, the VLIR-QAU does not expand this by publishing summarizing and/or analytical articles or reports containing broader system-wide summaries and analyses based on the review reports and the additional information that the Unit's secretaries might have collected during the review processes. This is regrettable as the Unit has a wealth of information at its disposal that could be put to descriptive and analytical use.

In the January 2009 update to the Self-Evaluation Report mention is made of a project that has been developed to make a broader analysis of the published assessment reports and to search for 'best practices' which could be valuable to other programmes. Envisaged are three stages:

- During the first stage the comparative score tables will be analysed (quantitative data, significant correlations between scores and aspects, significant correlations between scores, aspects and defined groups of programmes).
- At the second stage, a qualitative analysis of the scores will be conducted. A report on the results of those two phases is planned early autumn of 2009.
- The third stage would focus on the development of a user-friendly tool to analyse the results of future assessments systematically.

At the moment of the review however, the VLIR-QAU does not completely measure up to the requisites of this standard.

4.8.3 Conclusion

The VLIR-QAU Quality Assurance Unit substantially complies with ESG 2.8.

4.9 ESG 3.1: Use of external Quality Assurance procedures

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.

4.9.1 Description

The Flemish quality assurance system consists of three tiers:

- Institutional level: the universities establish and maintain an internal system of quality assurance at institutional and programme level.
- Quality assurance agency level: all programmes are periodically reviewed by an independent, external panel; these panel reviews are organised and supported by the VLIR-QAU.

- Accreditation agency level: the reports by the review panels serve as a basis for formal accreditation of the programmes by the NVAO. Accreditation is a prerequisite for state funding of the programme and for degree awarding power.

As has been demonstrated in the previous paragraphs the external quality assurance processes as described in Part 2 of the *European Standards and Guidelines* are all present in a satisfactory way.

4.9.2 Analysis

See the analyses of the standards of Part 2 of the ESG in paragraphs 4.1 up to and including 4.8.

Although the committee has made a critical remark with regard to ESG 2.8, this is no reason to withhold the judgement of full compliance, given the fact that to a certain extent broader analyses are being made.

4.9.3 Conclusion

The VLIR-QAU fully complies with ESG 3.1.

4.10 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.

4.10.1 Description

The role of the VLIR QAU is firmly established within the legislation. Article 57bis, § 2ter of the Higher Education Act clearly establishes the role of the VLIR as a quality assessment body. It is also stipulated that the VLIR is responsible for drawing up the Educational Assessment Visits Guide (*Decreet betreffende de herstructurering van het hoger onderwijs in Vlaanderen* art. 93, § 3).

The role of the Recognition committee (that checks the independence of proposed members of review panels) is also established in the legislation (*Decreet betreffende de herstructurering van het hoger onderwijs in Vlaanderen*, art. 93, § 3bis).

Compliance of the VLIR-QAU with requirements of the legislative jurisdictions is checked amongst others by the NVAO and the Recognition committee.

4.10.2 Analysis

The legal basis of the VLIR-QAU derives from the legal basis of VLIR, which is designated by law as the quality assessment body, and has allocated the execution of this task to a separate unit in such a way as to exclude the possibility of any influence of the VLIR board upon the selection of panel members, the deliberations of the review panels and the drafting of the re-

view reports. The panel will discuss the independence in paragraph 4.14 as ESG 3.2 does not specifically address this aspect.

It was abundantly clear in the meeting with the VLIR Board and with the institutional and faculty quality assurance coordinators from the universities that the chosen arrangement (of delegating the quality assessment to the VLIR) greatly enhances the ownership and involvement of the institutions, and is conducive to the realisation of the improvement function of the system.

4.10.3 Conclusion

The VLIR-QAU fully complies with ESG 3.2.

4.11 ESG 3.3: Activities

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

4.11.1 Description

The VLIR-QAU's main activity is the organisation and conduct of programme evaluations with a view to external quality assurance. Since the introduction of accreditation in 2005, the Unit (as of the end of 2007) has assessed 247 of the total of 597 programmes scheduled for the present cycle of assessments. The programme evaluations are conducted in a cycle of eight years.

4.11.2 Analysis

The VLIR QAU undertakes external quality assurance activities on a regular basis. These aim at the programme level only (given the three-tier system and the absence of institutional evaluation in the quality assurance system).

4.11.3 Conclusion

The VLIR-QAU fully complies with ESG 3.3.

4.12 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 and procedures.

4.12.1 Description

The VLIR-QAU staff consists of:

- An academic coordinator (0,3 FTE).
- A coordinator (1 FTE).
- Eight staff members (8 FTE).
- Two administrative staff members (1,5 FTE).

The Flemish universities fund the VLIR's policy support work and the work of the VLIR-QAU. They also foot the bill for the assessments. The Unit's in-

come thus varies from year to year depending on the number of programmes to be assessed.

For 2008 the Unit budgeted a revenue of € 358,020 (general functioning) and € 767,247 (individual assessments), resulting in an overall revenue of € 1,125,267. For 2009 € 365,180 is budgeted for general functioning and € 954,000 for individual assessments, resulting in an overall revenue of € 1.319.180. The budget rise (+17%) is mainly due to an increase in the number of assessments.

To be able to estimate its financial needs as accurately as possible, the VLIR-QAU has drawn up a financial policy plan for the period 2007–2011. Because the period 2009–2010 will see a peak in the number of assessments, extra staff workers were recruited for two or three years (2.5 FTE).

4.12.2 Analysis

The VLIR-QAU budget only refers to its own activities and those of the review panels. The total costs of the programme assessment and accreditation procedures are higher and involve also the costs for drawing up the self-evaluation reports for the review panels (funded by the universities) and the costs of the accreditation by the NVAO (funded by the Ministry). The panel considers the entire quality assessment and accreditation system as rather costly but thorough.

In the Self-Evaluation Report the VLIR-QAU states that its financial and personnel resources are 'very limited' and that additional human resources would be needed "if the Unit wishes to achieve all its ambitions in terms of policy monitoring and support (monitoring and contributing to the development of a new system, performing wider-ranging substantive analyses)" (p. 45).

Of course there is a balance between budget and activities, but the panel would be hard pressed to consider the VLIR-QAU under-budgeted. The panel suggests an internal re-assessment by the VLIR-QAU of the efficiency of its various procedures, which might possibly create some room for other activities that the panel considers desirable (cf. paragraph 4.8).

Of course, if the tasks of the Unit were to be expanded (e.g., with regard to monitoring of follow up), it could have budgetary consequences.

4.12.3 Conclusion

The VLIR Quality Assurance Unit fully complies with ESG 3.4.

4.13 ESG 3.5: Mission statement

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

4.13.1 Description

The VLIR-QAU has formulated the following mission 'description' ('Opdrachtsverklaring'):

"In the context of the statutory role assigned to the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR), VLIR's Quality Assurance Unit is responsible

for the coordination of the joint external assessments of the academic programmes organised by the universities. Moreover, the VLIR Quality Assurance Unit is responsible together with VLHORA for the coordination of the external assessments of the academic programmes organised by university colleges in the context of an association and for the academic programmes jointly organised by universities and university colleges. The VLIR seeks, in the context of external quality assurance, to contribute to the monitoring and improvement of the quality of university education by carrying out external educational assessments.

The Quality Assurance Unit fulfils this role by organising on a regular basis educational assessment visits, carried out by panels of independent and authoritative peers. Their findings are published in public reports. The tools used by the Quality Assurance Unit in the execution of its role are supported by research and consultation with its partners.

During the assessment process, the Quality Assurance Unit attaches particular importance in its coordinatory role to:

- monitoring the independence, transparency and consistent execution of the whole process;
- recognising and respecting the individuality and stimulating the engagement of the programmes under assessment;
- ensuring attention for both the accountability and the improvement function of the assessment process.

As tangible end products of the assessment process, the published reports are intended to inform the outside world objectively about the quality of the visited programmes, offer constructive suggestions on improving quality within the programmes and as such constitute the substantive basis for the issue of formal accreditations." (SER, p. 15-16)

This statement is published on their website:

http://www.vlir.be/content1.aspx?url=p_201.htm.

4.13.2 Analysis

The VLIR-QAU mission description is not a mission statement in the full sense of the term. It describes what the Unit does rather than what it stands for. In the Self-Evaluation Report and in the meetings, the Unit expressed the wish to develop a "true mission statement, in which it wishes to express its vision and its role with regard to all aspects of quality assurance." (SER, p. 16). Amongst other things, the Unit would like to incorporate a more active role at study days and conferences, the recording of best practices and the conduct of meta-analyses of the impact of the assessment system.

The panel agrees with the Unit that mission statement which is more vision- and ambition-oriented is preferable to the current statement.

However, in terms of the ESG 3.5, the current mission description is sufficient.

4.13.3 Conclusion

The VLIR-QAU fully complies with ESG 3.5.

4.14 ESG 3.6: Independence

Agencies should be independent to the extent that they have both 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.

4.14.1 Description

The standard of independence is relevant both to the VLIR-QAU and the members of the review panels that are coordinated by the Unit.

VLIR-QAU

The VLIR-QAU is part of the VLIR, the autonomous consultative and advisory body of the Flemish universities. The Higher Education Act grants the VLIR an autonomous and independent position with respect to its roles in the context of the organisation of external quality assurance. What matters, of course, is the independence of the VLIR-QAU from any influence from the VLIR board.

However, the VLIR Board has no way of intervening in the work of the Unit, other than defining the budget and formally ratifying the composition of review panels.

The independence of the Unit is for a large part assured by the independence of the review panels (see below). Staff members of the Unit act as secretaries to the panels but they are not members of the panel and have no formal say in the findings of the panel.

Panel members

The independent functioning of the Unit is realised by ensuring the independence of the assessment panels in the formulation of their conclusions and recommendations. To ensure this independence, various safeguards have been built in:

- The programmes under assessment are only involved in the first phase of the selection of the panel; they can suggest candidates (for chairpersons and members).
- The chairperson can add candidate panel members to that list and composes the panel in cooperation with the VLIR-QAU project manager for the review.
- Various grounds for incompatibility are defined.
- Candidate panel members are required to sign twice a statement of independence: as a precondition for joining the panel and at the end of the assessment process, declaring that they have carried out the assessment in complete independence (from institutional interests).
- Before the panel can officially start its work, its independence is checked by the Higher Education Recognition Commission.

4.14.2 Analysis

There is no indication (on the basis of the documents that were studied or the meetings that were held) of insufficient independence of the VLIR-QAU and the review panels or of undue influence by the VLIR board or the universities.

However, the Unit believes that its independence within the VLIR can and should be reinforced further. In the second part of 2007, the VLIR Board approved the creation of an autonomous Operational Bureau for the QAU to further insulate it from the VLIR Board, and to reinforce the governance of the Unit itself. Since then, the decision has been made to merge the VLIR and the VHLORA (and their respective quality assurance units). Consequently no concrete steps in this direction will be taken until the merger of both units.

The panel agrees that the issue of independence demands attention. A possible way to enhance QAU's independence would be to create a separate steering committee (or 'quality board'), responsible for the operational working of the Unit.⁶ This would have the advantage that the Unit would get more 'dedicated' support, because in the current situation the VLIR board has a much broader scope of activities. Furthermore this steering committee could serve as a 'firewall' against any VLIR Board influence.

The panel does not suggest severing the tie between the Unit and the VLIR, as the ownership of quality assurance by the universities is an important achievement. The composition of the steering committee, however, should not be similar to that of the VLIR Board. Academics are needed, but they could include also international and stakeholder representatives to improve the accountability of the quality assurance system and the ownership of stakeholders.

Some remarks can be made with regard to the independence of the panels. In the present situation the procedure starts with the nomination of candidate chairpersons and panel members by the faculty coordinators. The VLIR-QAU project manager responsible for a specific review presents a proposal regarding the chairperson and a list of candidate members (discipline experts, educational expert and student) to the VLIR board for ratification. The chairperson then composes the panel in cooperation with the project manager. There is communication with the programme coordinator about the composition to avoid certain incompatibilities that could only be identified by the faculty coordinator. Finally, the Higher Education Recognition Commission checks the independence of the panel members.

Despite all efforts to create a transparent procedure, part of it remains a 'black box'. The panel has learned from the Higher Education Recognition Commission (that does a final check on the independence of the panel members) that in about 25 percent of the panels some form of incompatibility or dependency is identified (or cannot completely be ruled out). That is a high percentage in terms of *panels* (remarks concerning 8 of 29 panels), but is substantially smaller in terms of panel *members* (less than 5%; 11 out of 228 proposed panel members). In these cases a modus vivendi has been found to minimise the impact of any incompatibility or dependency by not letting the concerned panel member take part in the visit to the institution where a potential incompatibility or dependency is signalled.

⁶ The VLIR Board could of course still keep the formal responsibility to maintain the quality assurance function.

In almost 10 percent of the cases (3 out of 34 panels) assessment panels have fulfilled their task without a student member (no student could be found; students were not considered independent by the Higher Education Recognition Commission; students withdrew shortly before the assessment visit). This should of course be avoided as much as possible.

The VLIR-QAU now plays only a very limited role in composing the panel. There are good reasons for that (who could be better qualified to nominate panel candidates than the academics themselves) but there is the downside of the 'black box' in part of the process. Furthermore, there is the possibility that the interest to participate will wane in the course of time (as panel membership is quite time-consuming).

In the Dutch system, the quality assurance agencies have the responsibility to compose the panels and have formed a pool of panel members. Independence can, thus, be better guarded; it has the added advantage of creating a more experienced and trained pool of panel members.⁷

Apart from that, the panel also stressed the importance of international peers in the review panels. This would promote not only independence but would also contribute to a stronger international frame of reference.

With regard to student participation, action should certainly be taken. The panel understood, in the meeting with representatives of the student organisation, that they cannot readily play an active role. They have no way of actively contacting all students of programmes that are going to be reviewed and mention that they are generally not well informed about the review schedules, with the result that they cannot adequately inform students.

The VLIR-QAU could arrange together with the student organisation the formation of a pool of (possibly trained) students for panel membership. The panel feels that it is preferable, but not necessary, that the student member of a panel should be always a student in the exact discipline to be reviewed; that could also be a related discipline (this view was supported by the student delegation). This way, it could also be easier to find students.

All the remarks made about independence, however, do not imply non-compliance with ESG 3.6. Independence certainly is sufficiently safeguarded. In this respect, the panel can also refer to a recent investigation of quality control in higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders by the Belgian Court of Audit and the Dutch Court of Audit. Specifically the courts investigated whether the universities did not influence the assessment results in their function as member of the VLIR Board. The courts of audit concluded that the VLIR, in its capacity as quality assurance agency, has demarcated its activities properly and has limited any conflict of interests effectively.⁸

⁷ On the other hand, the principle must be that peers, and not professional auditors, do the reviews but that does not rule out attention to training.

⁸ *Verslag van het Rekenhof en de Algemene Rekenkamer over kwaliteitsbewaking in het hoger onderwijs in Nederland en Vlaanderen* (Report of the Belgian Court of

4.14.3 Conclusion

The VLIR-QAU fully complies with ESG 3.6.

4.15 ESG 3.7: External quality assurance criteria and processes

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;
- the 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.

4.15.1 Description

All the elements contained in ESG 3.7 are clearly present in the Flemish system. They are also predefined and publicly available.

4.15.2 Analysis

With regard to the item 'follow-up' it is clear that the review is not executed by the VLIR-QAU, but this not required by ESG 3.7. There is a follow-up review, but at the university level. This became evident in the meeting with programme and institutional coordinators and was further substantiated by follow-up reports that the panel received. However the procedure could be improved. The panel has elaborated on this point in paragraph 4.6.

4.15.3 Conclusion

The VLIR Quality Assurance Unit fully complies with ESG 3.7

4.16 ESG 3.8: Accountability procedures

Agencies should have procedures in place for their own accountability.

4.16.1 Description

As part of the VLIR, the Unit is accountable on a regular and structural basis to the main stakeholders via the VLIR Bureau, the VLIR Board and the VLIR working groups and sub-working groups.

The Quality Assurance Unit's internal quality assurance system involves the following procedures:

- Processing remarks and complaints.
All remarks, problems or complaints can be reported to staff members or to the Unit's coordinator. They will try to mediate any problems. There is always the possibility to enter a formal procedure of arbitration.

Audit and the Dutch Court of Audit on quality assurance in the higher education in Flanders and The Netherlands), September 4, 2007, par. 3.5.2, p. 65.

- External consultation
The Unit is consulting the universities on an ongoing basis via the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Working Group. The Working Group discusses quality assurance-related problems, carries out policy preparation work, and formulates formal opinions to the administrative bodies of the VLIR with regard to external quality assurance.
The panel has understood in the meeting with university and programme coordinators that there is a good working relationship.
There is also regular consultation with organisations concerned with quality assurance in Flemish higher education, such as the VHLORA, NVAO, VVS (National Union of Students in Flanders), and the Flemish government. There is also regular contact with the Dutch counterpart organisations QANU (Quality Assurance Netherlands Universities) and VSNU (Association of Universities in the Netherlands).
- Internal organisation.
All programme assessment are organised and supported by VLIR-QAU staff. The organisation of a visitation is based on detailed script, laid out in a 15-step plan. This plan (which the panel has studied) outlines in detail the various steps in the process, including sheets and formats to be used.
- Staff members are guided by the Unit's coordinator and there are regular staff meetings where information can be exchanged. A weekly smaller executive staff meeting takes care of the day-to-day business.
- Composition of programme assessment panels
There is a strict procedure for the composition of the panel, in which various parties play a specified role (VLIR-QAU, faculty coordinators from the universities, chairman of the assessment panel, the VLIR Board, the Higher Education Recognition Commission).
- Feedback systems
The VLIR-QAU gathers on a regular basis feedback from all parties concerned to check its procedures and to promote improvement. Feedback is requested from: chairmen and members of assessment panels, faculty coordinators, institutional coordinator, students, the Unit's staff members (including the secretariat), government, the Higher Education Recognition Commission and NVAO.
Some of the stakeholders participate via an electronic questionnaire (per semester or year); others are consulted in meetings.
Feedback findings are compiled and discussed in the Unit's staff meetings and in the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Working Group
- International dimension
The VLIR is a 'full member' of INQAAHE (International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education) and ENQA, and cooperates with various other international organisations in the field of quality assurance and accreditation.

Recently, during the preparation of the Self-Evaluation Report a survey was administered among all those directly involved in the assessment process leading to internal reflection on and the introduction of a number of improvements.

4.16.2 Analysis

The panel has understood in the meeting with faculty and university coordinators that there are good working relationships and that the academic community feels actively involved and taken seriously as a partner. The NVAO has (February 14, 2005) explicitly acknowledged that the VLIR Educational Assessment Visits Guide was conducive to reports that can serve as a valid basis for accreditation decisions. Furthermore, every single panel report that is submitted for accreditation is scrutinized by NVAO to ensure that it provides credible evidence and a valid basis for an accreditation decision.

In the meeting with NVAO representatives the quality of the panel reports and of the work of the Unit in general was explicitly underlined.

The panel is pleased to see that the findings in the Self-Evaluation Report were not only based on impressions from meetings but also on the results of a survey. This instrument will be further developed; the Unit has sought professional assistance and is considering outsourcing the data gathering and primary analysis.

In general though, the internal quality assurance still relies for a substantial part on relatively 'soft' instruments. Given the scale and the number of key persons and parties involved, this is feasible. However, the panel would welcome a more systematic approach: periodic reviews of the processes, an annual action plan et cetera. The panel regards the electronic survey as a useful addition in this regard.

Furthermore the panel considers involvement of stakeholders outside the higher education environment, as in fact too weak. The VLIR is not sufficiently sensitive to the needs of a wider set of stakeholders. The panel refers to its recommendation in paragraph 4.14 (in the context of enhancing the independence of the VLIR-QAU) on giving stakeholders a substantial representation in an advisory board. This also would be beneficial in terms of accountability. The panel considers this an important element; however, as ESG 3.8 is not explicit about the role of stakeholders with regard to accountability processes, compliance is not affected.

4.16.3 Conclusion

The VLIR-QAU Unit fully complies with ESG 3.8.

5. Conclusions

In this chapter the panel formulates its conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Compliance of the VLIR-QAU with the ESG

In the light of the documentary and oral evidence considered, the Review Panel is satisfied that, in the performance of its functions, the VLIR-QAU Quality Assurance Unit is in compliance with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. The Panel therefore recommends to the Board of ENQA that the VLIR-QAU should have its Full Membership of ENQA confirmed for a further period of five years.

5.2 Recommendations

In this section the panel presents its recommendations. The (implementation of the) recommendations are not conditional for the compliance assessment of the VLIR-QAU with the ESG.

The recommendations are relevant to the functioning of the VLIR-QAU. However, implementing them will, in most instances, also require involvement of other parties.

5.2.1 Stakeholder involvement

The system has the characteristic of a 'closed shop', in the sense that it is very much centred on the academia. This has the obvious and important benefit of a great sense of ownership by the universities and of a strong improvement orientation. However, it infringes somewhat on the accountability function, and it isolates the system in some way from broader societal involvement. This is apparent, for instance, in the fact that the panel reports have little impact outside the academic community and have limited value for prospective students and employers (see also paragraph 5.2.2).

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.

5.2.2 Reports

The panel reports are not written with a broader readership (i.e., other than that of the universities and the NVAO) in mind. The reports contain information that can be important for students (especially when choosing at which university to study a given programme) and for employers (when employing a graduate). But this information is not readily accessible in a concise manner.

The panel strongly recommends making the relevant information in the panel reports more readily available to prospective students and other stakeholders. The VLIR-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.

5.2.3 Follow-up

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 the VLIR-QAU a role in this.

5.2.4 'Master after master'

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.

5.2.5 Themes, aspects, criteria and point of attention

Programmes are assessed on the basis of 6 themes, 21 aspect, 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 quality assurance 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.

5.2.6 Discipline-specific frame of reference

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.

5.2.7 Duration of the entire process

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.

5.2.8 Mission statement

The VLIR-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 quality assurance than only via its coordination function.

5.2.9 System wide analyses

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.

5.2.10 Accountability procedures

In general, the internal quality assurance 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.

5.2.11 Independence of the VLIR-QAU

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 quality assurance in any way.

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.

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) should be handled cautiously.

5.2.12 Independence of programme assessment panels

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.

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.

6. Annexes

6.1 Composition of the review panel

Marcel Crochet, Expert in the field of the Belgian universities; chairman of the panel.

Former rector of the University of Louvain-la-Neuve, advisor of the Minister of Higher Education of the French Community of Belgium, member of NVAO evaluation committee.

Lee Harvey, Expert in quality assurance and higher education policy. Independent consultant on higher education. Visiting professor at Copenhagen Business School. Former director of Centre for Research and Evaluation, Sheffield Hallam University.

Herman Du Toit, International expert in quality assurance and higher education policy.

Project Manager Quality Promotion and Capacity Development: HEQC.

Andree Sursock, International expert in quality Assurance in universities. Deputy Secretary General in charge with quality assurance of EUA, member of NVAO evaluation committee.

Mia Douterlungne, Stakeholder member.

Secretary General (Administrateur-Generaal) of the Flemish advisory board for education (VLOR).

Gertie De Fraeye, Student member.

Chair of VVS (National Union of Students in Flanders) responsible for the coordination, educational affairs and QA.

Carlo Hover, independent consultant on quality assurance in higher education; secretary of the review panel.

All panel members have signed a declaration of independence.

6.2 Glossary of acronyms

ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
INQAAHE	International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
NVAO	Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands & Flanders
QANU	Quality Assurance Netherlands Universities
VLIR	Flemish Interuniversity Council
VLHORA	Flemish Council of University Colleges
VLOR	Flemish Advisory Board for Education
VSNU	Association of Universities in the Netherlands
VVS	National Union of Students in Flanders

6.3 Schedule of the site visit

<i>Tuesday 3 February</i>		
PREPARATION		
15h00	17h45	Preparatory meeting of the panel, time to study available documents <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Panel alone
17h45	19h00	Meeting with members of VLIR Council and Management of Quality Assurance Unit <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ M. Vervenne (Chair VLIR) ▪ L. Melis (member VLIR Council) ▪ Y. Michotte (member VLIR Council) ▪ E. Nauwelaerts (representing L. De Schepper, member VLIR Council) ▪ R. S'Jegers (General Director VLIR) ▪ E. Van Avermaet (Academic Coordinator VLIR Unit QA) ▪ M. Bronders (Coordinator VLIR Unit QA)
19h00		Formal welcome aperitif <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ M. Vervenne (Chair VLIR) ▪ L. Melis (member VLIR Council) ▪ Y. Michotte (member VLIR Council) ▪ E. Nauwelaerts (member VLIR Council) ▪ R. S'Jegers (General Director VLIR) ▪ E. Van Avermaet (Academic Coordinator VLIR Unit QA) ▪ M. Bronders (Coordinator VLIR Unit QA) ▪ Staff & Support Staff Unit QA
20h00		Diner panel: Museum Brasserie <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Panel alone

Wednesday 4 February

Theme 'QUALITY ASSURANCE UNIT'		
9h00	10h00	Meeting with members of Quality Assurance and Accreditation Working Group <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ E. Van Avermaet (Chair QA&A WG) ▪ P. Ameloot (UHasselt) ▪ F. Van Den Bogaert (UAntwerpen)
10h15	11h15	Meeting with staff QA Unit <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ M. Bronders ▪ D. Cortvriendt ▪ P. Daerden ▪ I. De Vooght ▪ J. Stockmans ▪ P. Van den Bosch ▪ P.-J. Van de Velde ▪ S. Van Luchene ▪ E. Van Zele
11h15	11h45	Break
11h45	12h30	Meeting with administrative personnel QAUnit <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A. Despiegheleir (administrative support) ▪ S. Spolspoel (administrative support) ▪ J. Van Haver (financial support)
12h30	14h30	Lunch, time to study available documents and short feedback meeting with member review panel VLHORA <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Panel alone ▪ 12h45 - 13h 15: A. Demeulemeester (member review panel VLHORA)
Theme 'ASSESSMENT'		
14h30	15h30	Meeting with Faculty Coordinators & Institutional Coordinators from Universities ⁹ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ F. Gladines (IC, VUB) ▪ J. Claeys (IC, UGent) ▪ J. Hoornaert (Former IC KULeuven) ▪ I. Verachttert (UAntwerpen)

⁹ The panel had received a note with impressions about and reflections upon the functioning of the VLIR Quality Assurance Agency by Mr. Paul Schotsmans (faculty coordinator, Faculty of Medicine, K.U. Leuven, Belgium) who was not able to attend the meeting.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ H. Vanherzeele (FC 'Bouwkunde' 2007, VUB) ▪ D. Vanneste (FC Toerisme, K.U.Leuven, 2007) ▪ H. Bocken, (F.C. 'Advanced Master's study programmes in Law' 2006, UGent) ▪ I. Loots (F.C 'Milieuwetenschappen', 2006 UAntwerpen) ▪ L. Bossaert (F.C. 'Verpleegkunde / Vroedkunde 2008 UAntwerpen) ▪ M. Aerts (FC 'Statistiek' 2007 UHasselt) ▪ G. Van Heusden (FC, ITG, 2007)
15h30	16h30	<p>Meeting with former assessment panel members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ L.W. Gormley (Chair 'Advanced Master's study programmes in Law, 2006) ▪ P. Vercauteren (Chair 'Politieke Wetenschappen, 2007) ▪ A. Diekmann (discipline expert 'Toerisme VLIR/VLHORA', 2007) ▪ J. Perquy (educational expert 'Politieke Wetenschappen', 2007 / 'Kunstwetenschappen en Archeologie', 2008) ▪ D. Demedts (Student Verpleegkunde / Vroedkunde, 2008) ▪ A.Y. Castro Sanchez (Student 'Statistiek', 2007)
16h30	17h00	Break
Theme 'STAKEHOLDERS'		
17h00	17h45	<p>Meeting with VLHORA (Flemish sister organisation for University Colleges)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A. Verreth (Secretary General VLHORA) ▪ K. Dewilde (Coordinator Unit QA VLHORA, member QA&A WG) ▪ S. Landuyt (Staff member Unit QA VLHORA, member of common VLIR/VLHORA working group New Accreditation System) ▪ Paul Garré (Member Steering Committee Quality Assurance VLHORA)
17h45	18h30	<p>Meeting with NVAO (Accreditation Organisation)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ G. Aelterman (Vice president, NVAO) ▪ G. Langouche (Board member, NVAO) ▪ M. Wera (Policy advisor, familiar with VLIR dossiers, NVAO)
18h30	19h15	<p>Review panel meeting & further time to study documents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Panel alone ▪ Staff Unit QA 'stand by' for eventual questions

	19h15		Informal aperitif with the interlocutors of that day
	20h00		Diner panel: L'Épicerie <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Panel alone

Thursday 5 February

Theme 'STAKEHOLDERS' (continued)		
9h00	9h45	Meeting with members of Ministry & Recognition Commission <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ J. Van Marle (Chairman Recognition Commission) ▪ B. Craps (Recognition Commission) ▪ N. Vercruysse (head of department on higher education)
9h45	10h30	Meeting with VVS (Student organisation) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ J.Vansina (Board member, in charge of selection student members panel) ▪ R.Resseler (Staff member)
CONCLUSION		
10h30	12h30	Concluding review panel meeting & lunch <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Panel alone
12h30	13h00	Concluding meeting & preliminary oral report <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ R. S'Jegers (General Director VLIR) ▪ E. Van Avermaet (Academic Coordinator VLIR Unit QA) ▪ M. Bronders (Coordinator VLIR Unit QA) ▪ Staff Unit QA