

Introduction

From 10 June to 12 June 2019 the ENQA Peer Review of VLUHR QA took place in the VLUHR QA offices in Brussels. The final report of the panel was approved and published by ENQA on 19 September 2019. VLUHR QA then applied for a renewal of registration with EQAR. On 16 March 2020 EQAR approved the application by VLUHR QA for renewal of inclusion on the register.

The recommendations and suggestions from the ENQA Peer review report were taken to heart by VLUHR QA. In this regard, it is important to mention that in September 2019 the Flemish Quality Assurance Framework changed. Therefore, VLUHR QA developed the new [Manual for programme reviews](#) that takes into account the legislative changes. The methodology of VLUHR QA remained the same. Nevertheless, VLUHR QA used the opportunity to already respond to some of the panel's recommendations. VLUHR QA also revised the [Manual for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, Brussels, January 2020](#) from the same perspective.

Due to this fortunate timing, VLUHR QA thus succeeded - stimulated by the results of the peer review report - in completely following up on some recommendations in a very short time. The recommendations and suggestions were discussed within the QA Board on October 18, 2019 and with stakeholders at the meeting of November 25, 2019. These have led to adjustments in the manuals. These changes were then reported to EQAR when submitting the VLUHR QA application.

After we, at VLUHR QA, switched to working online to respond to the new needs caused by the COVID 19 pandemic, we were able to spend time again to the continuous reflection on our organisation.

VLUHR QA works with five-year policy plans. The current policy plan is in effect from 2018 - 2022. We are planning a new policy plan for the period 2023 - 2027. To this end, VLUHR QA kicked off with an online two-day policy event in October 2020. During this event, a wide range of stakeholders and partners were consulted, including several other QA agencies. During each of these meetings, the recommendations of the peer review panel were also discussed in detail.

The future policy plan has already taken shape and will be finalised in 2022. We consider the ENQA progress visit that will take place this autumn as another important factor of input for our further future-proof development.

In this follow-up report we will elaborate on how VLUHR QA has dealt with the recommendations and suggestions of the ENQA review panel over the past two years.

ESG 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance.

Recommendation: VLUHR QA is recommended to ensure enhanced stakeholder participation in the governance of the VLUHR QA through greater involvement of representatives from the Flemish higher education sector.

The discussions VLUHR QA held with its stakeholders (including during the kick-off meetings in autumn 2020) indicate that they feel represented in the overall governance structure of VLUHR QA. Nevertheless, we have tried to optimise further where possible. As the current (two -yearly renewable) mandate of the VLUHR QA Board expired in February 2021, and one of the board members indicated that he would not be renewing his mandate, this was an opportunity to further reflect on the composition of the VLUHR QA Board.

VLUHR QA is proud of the broad international composition of its QA Board, yet the Board members detected the need to also have Board members who have a stronger connection with Flemish Higher Education. The QA Board was therefore expanded from four to five members as of February 2021. The two new members also had to meet the requirement of being independent from a Flemish higher education institution, to guarantee the independence of VLUHR QA towards the higher education institutions and umbrella organisation VLUHR. A former director of a Flemish university of applied sciences and arts and a former education director of a Flemish university joined the QA Board since February 2021. Both have a lot of experience in participating in evaluation panels: both as a panel member and as a representative of programmes to be evaluated.

The composition of the QA Board (February 2021 – February 2023) is:

- Petter Aaslestad - President, Professor of Literature Science NTNU (Trondheim) and former President NOKUT and former President Forskerforbundet, Norway
- Elfriede Heinen - Vice-President, Former Pedagogical Counsellor for the Federation of Catholic Higher Education Bruxelles, Belgium
- Henning Dettleff - Member, Director Education & Training, Bundesverband für Wohnen und Stadtentwicklung Berlin, Germany
- Mia Sas - Member, Former Director Odisee Hogeschool, Belgium
- Cis Van Den Bogaert - Member, Honorary Head of Department Education Antwerp University, Belgium

This adjustment of the composition of the QA Board is certainly not an end point for VLUHR QA. Although the many discussions with stakeholders show a satisfactory level of commitment, we want to further optimise our governance. Several options are currently open. In 2022, the VLUHR QA Board will take a decision on this in function of its policy plan 2023-2027. In the meantime, we want to discuss stakeholder participation during the progress visit. We also want to use the progress visit to further discuss the role of the students in our governance structure. Even so the question whether or not to broaden our Advisory Board will be on the agenda during this meeting.

VLUHR QA intended participating in a staff mobility project within the 'Erasmus+ Key Action 3: Support for policy reform' focusing on governance and stakeholder participation. A staff member would visit an agency in Iceland with a similar governance to VLUHR QA in May 2020. Due to the COVID 19 pandemic, this activity did not take place.

Since this year, the "Learning Network Educational Supporting Staff" (Lerend Netwerk Onderwijsondersteuners), LNO², has made a new start, with the secretariat and coordination being taken care of by VLUHR QA. This network brings together all supporting staff of all Flemish higher education institutions. The network meetings focus on sharing good practices across the institutions. Working groups were set up on quality assurance, educational professionalisation, workplace learning, blended learning and life-long learning. The cooperation between VLUHR QA and LNO² strengthens the connection and involvement between VLUHR QA and the supporting staff in the HEIs.

ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis

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

Recommendation: Furthermore, VLUHR QA is recommended to identify the areas for thematic analysis that would be of interest for the higher education stakeholders.

Recommendation: Next, VLUHR QA is recommended to use the results of the thematic analysis in order to improve the quality assurance processes on institutional and national level.

VLUHR QA was aware that the aspect of thematic analysis was less present in its operations. Before 2015, programme assessments were organised in clusters and each assessment report contained a content comparison of similar programmes. In this way, the carrying out of thematic analyses was partly shaped in a structural way.

Systematically analysing and disseminating the information generated by VLUHR QA was not a priority for the organisation in the past. The reason for this is by no means a lack of interest, but rather a search for a balance in order to make optimal use of the organisation's resources.

Since the 2019 peer review VLUHR QA committed itself to a stronger focus on the structural execution of thematic analyses. This concerns both the use of assessment reports for analysis as thematic reports on specific topics.

On its meetings in October 2019 and February 2020, the QA Board discussed a discussion note on thematic analysis. In this note the QA Board prioritises topics for further thematic analysis. This was further refined at the QA Board meeting in October 2020.

In the short term (late 2021 / early 2022) we plan a thematic analysis on external stakeholder involvement in the internal quality assurance system of Flemish HEIs. We believe this thematic analysis can help to improve the quality assurance processes on institutional level. In 2022, a thematic analysis of Bachelor's programmes in Nursing is planned. In 2023, a comparative study of the results of our

evaluations according to the European Approach is already planned. Other possible topics are still being discussed internally.

As VLUHR QA also carries out other activities, not only material and data from our external quality assurance activities can be used for a thematic analysis. We find it useful and relevant to broaden the scope of thematic analyses (e.g. with regard to our activity on domain specific learning outcomes thematic analysis as we believe this can help to improve the quality assurance processes on institutional and national level, and e.g. in relation to topics defined by LNO²). However, it is important that we keep the link with the ESG. The QA Board is also considering performing thematic analysis with other agencies or with research institutions.

Moreover, the QA Board believes that carrying out a thematic analysis and disseminating its results can contribute to the (international) profiling of VLUHR QA. Since 2019 we published these articles.

- [Codiplômation et assurance qualité dans l'enseignement supérieur en Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles et en Flandre](#), Yoneko Nurtantio (AEQES), Cosmina Ghebaur (ARES) & Patrick Van den Bosch (VLUHR KZ), Brussel 2021
- [Programme Review Analysis 2015 - 2020](#), VLUHR KZ, Brussel 2020
- [Analyse stakeholderbevragingen 2018 - 2020](#), VLUHR KZ, Brussel 2020 (Dutch)
- [A first exploration of the 'European approach for quality assurance of joint programmes](#), Patrick Van den Bosch (VLUHR KZ) & Roel Vande Winkel (KU Leuven, LUCA School of Arts), Brussel 2019

'A first exploration of the 'European approach for quality assurance of joint programmes' was presented on EQAF in 2019. The article about 'codiplômation' was intended for a national conference in 2020 that was cancelled due to the COVID 19 pandemic.

Although we feel that we have already made significant steps towards a stronger focus on thematic analyses, we would like to discuss this further during the progress visit. This will allow us to check whether we are going in the right direction and what we can focus on in more detail.

ESG 3.5 Resources

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

Financial resources to appoint a staff member to actively make international project proposals or to carry out foreign prospecting is not within VLUHR QA's immediate possibilities. These prospecting activities take place but currently require additional efforts from the staff in addition to their other core tasks. We therefore try to use creativity to become strongly involved in international projects.

Since 2019, VLUHR QA has focused on participating in European projects, especially in the role of external evaluator. As a result, VLUHR QA manages to be involved in larger projects, whilst VLUHR QA's

share in these projects remains limited so that it also remains manageable for a small organisation such as VLUHR QA. Through these projects we expand our international network and build up experience with international projects. This increases the possibility that in the future, with the necessary experience, we will also be open to becoming an international project partner.

VLUHR QA is engaged in these international projects:

- Bologna Peer Support Group on Quality Assurance: Project Organisation
- Bologna Peer Support Group on Quality Assurance: Staff Mobility
- Developing a European Approach for Comprehensive QA of (European) University Networks (EUniQ)
- Mobility Widening Participation for students with a disability in Flanders and across Europe (EPFIME)
- Peer learning activities and resources for social inclusion in mobility programmes (PLAR-4-SIMP)
- Micro-credentials linked to the Bologna Key Commitments (Microbol)
- Empowering Higher Education in Adopting Digital Learning (POWERHEAD)

VLUHR QA is recently involved as a researcher in the project 'Mapping regional engagement of Universities of Applied Sciences' (UASIMAP). The main goal of the UASIMAP project is to map and further support the regional engagement activities of European professional higher education institutions, in particular Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS).

Dutch higher education may also be subject to some changes in the near future. Many HEIs and more and more policy makers want the Netherlands to switch to a system of only institutional accreditation, as is the case in Flanders. We notice that many Dutch HEIs look at VLUHR QA in this respect. We believe there is a potential here to use the expertise of VLUHR QA in Flanders in the Netherlands.

Since 2018, VLUHR QA can assess joint programmes with the system of the European approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. As VLUHR QA is not a national agency or an accreditation body, we feel we can approach reviews in a more flexible manner. We emphasise a tailor-made approach, wherein the uniqueness of the programme and the institution is central and where the demands of the national accreditation agencies are dealt with. We believe that this will allow us, as an agency, to add value in carrying out reviews according to the European Approach throughout Europe.

Last but not least, VLUHR QA engages in the ENQA community by participating in various activities organised by ENQA. A policy advisor of VLUHR QA is currently a member of the ENQA Agency Review Committee.

ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance

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

Due to the aforementioned changes in legislation in September 2019, VLUHR QA could already include this recommendation in the new VLUHR QA Manual for programme assessments. Under the previous legislation, programmes were assessed on 4 quality features whereas now programmes are assessed on 8 quality features.

The previous system focused on 4 quality features:

- standard 1 - Targeted outcome level
- Standard 2 - Educational learning environment
- Standard 3 - Outcome level achieved
- Standard 4 - Structure and organisation of internal quality assurance

In our current system, the quality of a programme is demonstrated by eight quality features. These features are the characteristics of a high-quality higher education programme and tie more closely than the previous four quality features in with the ESG, 2015. For each programme whose quality is satisfactory, the presence of the following quality features is guaranteed.

- 1.The programme's learning outcomes constitute a transparent and programme-specific interpretation of the international requirements regarding level, content, and orientation;
- 2.The programme's curriculum ties in with the most recent developments in the discipline, takes account of the developments in the professional field, and is relevant to society;
- 3.The staff allocated to the programme provide the students with optimum opportunities for achieving the learning outcomes;
- 4.The programme offers the students adequate and easily accessible services, facilities, and counselling;
- 5.The teaching and learning environment encourages the students to play an active role in the learning process and fosters smooth study progress;
- 6.The assessment of students reflects the learning process and concretises the intended learning outcomes;
- 7.The programme provides comprehensive and readable information on all stages of study;
- 8.Information regarding the quality of the programme is publicly accessible.

In addition to these 8 quality features, a programme has to ensure the involvement of internal and external stakeholders on the one hand and external and independent peers and experts on the other hand, in a continuous pursuit of quality development. If applicable, the programme must also comply with relevant regulations with respect to the admission of graduates to corresponding posts or professions.

Each panel is given a full-day training before they carry out a programme assessment. During this training, there is a specific focus on the ESG and how they are translated into the Flemish assessment framework.

Finally, the VLUHR QA Board was also given a more explicit role in ensuring that the reports meet the requirements set. This was also a suggestion from the peer review panel: *VLUHR QA could revise the process for internal approval of panel reports to ensure that the review reports are read by the VLUHR QA Board before publishing or replace the foreword of the VLUHR QA Board by a more general introduction by VLUHR QA.*

At least 2 members of the QA Board read every report before publishing it. The QA Board developed a form to scrutinise if reports meet the criteria set out in the VLUHR QA-manuals. This gives the QA Board the opportunity to ask for clarification, if needed. However, the assessment panel remains the owner of the content of the report. In this way, the QA Board checks structurally that all the elements covered by the ESG Part 1 are analysed in the review reports.

ESG 2.3 Implementing processes

Recommendation: VLUHR QA is recommended that its Board considers making the follow-up procedure a mandatory element of the review process, while also collaborating with the HEIs and other stakeholders to ensure the procedure provides a clear added value for them.

The panel recommended that the follow-up procedure should be considered a mandatory part of the assessment procedure. As indicated in the new manual for programme assessments, January 2020, the follow-up procedure is fully integrated in the assessment process.

It is a noteworthy observation that the institutions and programmes at which VLUHR QA conducts a programme assessment, without exception, state that they consider the concept of the follow-up system we have developed to be an added value of a programme assessment by VLUHR QA. Of course, this can also be explained by the fact that the programmes which are now assessed by VLUHR QA deliberately choose us as a QA agency, whereas in the past all programmes of all Flemish HEIs had to be assessed.

So far, no follow-up visits have been conducted since these take place three years after the initial site visit. The first experiences with the follow-up will be evaluated with all stakeholders involved in this process and adjusted where necessary.

Key challenges VLUHR QA would like to discuss during the progress visit.

- Stakeholder participation:
 - We would like to discuss the role of the students in its governance structure. At present, the Flemish Student Union has no desire to serve on the VLUHR QA Board. They feel they are sufficiently involved through the VLUHR QA Advisory Board, among other things.
 - Broaden the VLUHR QA Advisory Board with other types of stakeholders.
- Thematic analysis: We have made several efforts since 2019 and concrete plans have also taken shape. During the progress visit, we would like to check whether we are on the right track and what we can focus on in more detail.
- Positioning of VLUHR QA in the European field
 - For example in terms of European Approach: VLUHR QA wants to profile itself in the EHEA as a QA agency that specialises (among other things) in the European Approach for QA of Joint programmes. Currently we have published two reports with the EA-framework.