

**Report of the External Review of the Flemish
Council of University Colleges (VLHORA)**

October 2008

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1 Executive Summary

This report analyses the compliance of the Flemish Council of University Colleges (VLHORA) with the European Standards and Guidelines for external quality assurance agencies and thus fulfilling the membership criteria of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). The review has been coordinated by the Center for accreditation and Quality Assurance of the Swiss Universities (OAQ).

OAQ nominated a panel of international experts to carry out the external review. The review panel was formally approved by the ENQA board and accepted by VLHORA. The on-site visit took place at the premises of VLHORA in Brussels on the 30 September – 1 October 2008.

VLHORA was founded in 1996 by the university colleges as a non-profit organisation with the aim to strengthen the collaboration among themselves and to give the colleges a stronger unanimous voice. In 2003 VLHORA has been appointed by the Flemish Higher Education Act to coordinate the quality assessments of programmes with a professional orientation and, in collaboration with the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR), programmes with an academic orientation. VLHORA established a quality assurance agency that is organisationally and financially separated from VLHORA the umbrella organisation.

The review panel had some concerns about the independence of the quality assurance processes within such a system but came to the conclusion that VLHORA has various mechanisms in place that can assure the independence of the processes. However, the panel recommends that VLHORA involve more external stakeholders in the different bodies. In general the panel concluded that VLHORA should include more external viewpoints in order to achieve full external accountability.

The quality assurance processes are predetermined by law. The review panel found that within this system the processes seem to work but that VLHORA and its various key stakeholders should reflect further on, and identify more clearly, the aims and objectives of its quality assurance activities. VLHORA should also consider reviewing its mission statement and include a description of the purpose of its specific quality assurance roles.

The assessment method and the assessment framework are documented in the „VLIR/VLHORA Educational Assessment Visit Guide“. The review panel was impressed to find that all interview partners had extensive knowledge of the document and its content and found overall that the assessment method used by VLHORA meets the standards set by the ESG.

The self-evaluation report and the interviews held during the on-site visit gave the review panel enough evidence to come to the conclusion that VLHORA substantially complies with part 3 of the ESG. The review panel recommends to the Board of ENQA that VLHORA should have its full membership confirmed for a further period of five years.

2 Introduction

This report is the result of the external review of the Flemish Council of university colleges (VLHORA). The purpose of the review is to determine whether VLHORA meets the membership criteria of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), through its fulfilment of the European Standards and Guidelines for external Quality Assurance Agencies (ESG). Also, the review panel was asked to give the agency a feedback with respect to the scope of activity of VLHORA, reflecting on its national position as well as making suggestions for improvement¹. The review was organised and conducted according to the ENQA Guidelines for National Reviews. The review has been coordinated by the Center for Accreditation and Quality Assurance of the Swiss universities (OAQ).

3 The Review Process

3.1 The Review Panel

The panel members were selected and chosen by OAQ, formally approved by the ENQA board and accepted by VLHORA.

Members of the Expert Panel were:

- Nick Harris (peer leader) Director of Development and Enhancement, QAA, United Kingdom (until 30 September 2008) and UK Bologna Expert.
- Ann Demeulemeester, secretary general of ACW (umbrella body of workers' organisation), president of the Flemish Advisory Board for Education (VLOR)
- Irene Müller, delegate for international affairs at the Austrian Fachhochschulrat
- Lars Lynge Nielsen, rector university college Lillebaet, Denmark; president of Eurashe
- Gertie De Fraeye, chair of VVS (Flemish Students' Union)
- Stephanie Maurer, scientific collaborator, OAQ (secretary to the panel)

3.2 Self-evaluation report

VLHORA produced a self-evaluation report (84 pages) which was sent to the panel one month prior to the on-site visit. As an annex to the self-evaluation report the panel received the Educational Assessment Visit Guide of VLHORA. Other documents were available during the on-site visit.

The panel found the self-evaluation report to be a good document for the preparation of the on-site visit, as it is self-critical and provided an accurate picture of the strengths and

¹ OAQ-co-ordinated external review of VLHORA, Terms of reference for the review.

weaknesses of VLHORA. However, the review panel thought that the report was at times a little repetitive, focusing too much on the explanation of the processes and not enough on the actual fulfilment of the ESG. The self-evaluation raised some questions and led to some misunderstandings amongst the panel members, but these were clarified during the on-site visit. The panel noted that some of the documents which were only presented at the on-site visit (e.g. time path, flowchart of the procedure) would have been usefully included in the self-evaluation report.

3.3 On-Site Visit

The expert panel visited the offices of VLHORA in Brussels on 30 September - 1 October 2008. The panel met for a preparatory meeting the day before to discuss the self-evaluation report and share their first impressions regarding the fulfilment of the ESG. The panel also discussed the programme for the visit and initial lines of questioning were distributed among panel members.

During the two-day visit the panel met with different groups of stakeholders.² The meeting was very well organized and all interviews could be held according to the schedule. The panel was impressed by the lively, engaged, and open discussions in the interviews, and VLHORA staff were at all times available and provided the panel with access to all necessary documents.

4 Context of the Review

4.1 The Higher Education System in Flanders

In Flanders, higher education programmes are offered by the universities and the university colleges (Hogescholen). Following the Bologna Process and the introduction of the Bachelor/Master structure in the higher education area the Flemish Parliament issued the Higher Education Act of April 2003. This act introduced some fundamental changes in the existing educational system. Previously the universities offered two-cycle programmes with an academic orientation and doctoral degrees (as well as postgraduate programmes, teacher training). The university colleges offered both short-term (one-cycle) three-year programmes and long-term (two-cycles) four to five-year programmes. From 2004/05 the professionally-oriented Bachelor degrees are only offered in university colleges and the two-tier academically-oriented Bachelors and Masters degrees are offered in both universities and university colleges. As a consequence it became necessary for the university colleges to strengthen the links between education and research in their academic programmes. The Higher Education Act granted a transition phase for the university colleges to embed research into their programmes within a process to be concluded by 2012/13.

A particular feature of the Flemish system is that university colleges participate in scientific research within a framework of „associations“. Associations are legal entities that support the collaboration between a university and one or more university colleges. According to the

² Programme of the visit, Annex 1.

Higher Education Act an association can advise on the setting-up of new Bachelor or Master programmes, guide the process of adoption of academic standards in the two-cycle programmes, and control the number of degree programmes on offer within an association. University colleges can only offer programmes with an academic orientation within the framework of an association.

Degree Structure³

| HE - Professional Orientation | HE - Academic Orientation |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| University colleges | University and university colleges |
| Bachelor (Professional Orientation) | Bachelor (Academic Orientation) |
| Advanced Bachelor | |
| | Master |
| | Advanced Master |
| | Doctor's Degree (universities only) |
| Specific Teacher Training (may be partly sunk into Master's degree programme) | |
| Postgraduate | |
| Permanent Education | |

4.2 The Quality Assurance System in Flanders

Until the end of 2004 quality assurance in Flanders was entirely in the responsibility of the universities and the university colleges. They developed internal quality assurance systems and set up processes for the external quality assurance. The Higher Education Act of 2003 built upon this system but introduced the formal process of accreditation as an extension. Responsibility for accreditation in Flanders is held by the bi-national Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organization (NVAO). Accreditation is mandatory for all programmes in Flanders; without an accreditation a programme loses its right to issue degrees. The external assessments of the programmes by an independent panel of experts are the basis upon which accreditation is granted. Responsibility for the organization of the external assessments is taken by the two agencies VLHORA and VLIR (Flemish Interuniversity Council). VLHORA is responsible for the university colleges and VLIR for the universities.

³ Self-evaluation report, p. 10.

After the programmes have undergone the assessment they must apply to NVAO for accreditation. An accreditation is valid for eight years.

The existing quality assurance system is due to change within the next few years. There are plans to reduce the extent of programme accreditations and to introduce institutional audits. This system is being developed to lessen bureaucracy and to balance the costs and benefits of the quality assurance system. The new system is already in a pilot phase in which two university colleges and one university are participating.

4.3 The Flemish Council of University Colleges (VLHORA)

4.3.1 VLHORA as an Umbrella Organisation

The Flemish Council of university colleges was founded in 1996 in response to the 1994 university colleges Act, which led to a reduction in the number of colleges from 163 to 29. VLHORA was established by the university colleges themselves as a non-profit organization with the aim of strengthening the collaboration among them and giving the university colleges a stronger and unanimous 'voice'. The Flemish government recognized the importance of VLHORA and awarded it the status of an organization of public utility in 1998. The main role and mission of VLHORA as an umbrella organization is to give advice on government policies, to gather and distribute information to university colleges, to act as a cooperative research body, to perform analytical work, and to act as a discussion platform, consultative body and spokesman for the university colleges. VLHORA consists of a General Assembly, an Executive Board and a Bureau. Members of the General Assembly are the general managers of the 22 university colleges. The General Assembly appoints an Executive Board of 12 members from among themselves. University Colleges of all associations have to be represented in the Executive Board. The Executive Board chooses a Bureau consisting of a chairman, a vice-chairman, a secretary and a treasurer. The chairman presides over the meetings of the Executive Board as well as the General Assembly, with the chairman and the vice-chairman alternating after two years. VLHORA has a permanent secretariat that currently consists of 4.7 full-time equivalent posts. VLHORA is financed by the yearly contributions of the university colleges.

4.3.2 VLHORA as a Quality Assurance Agency

By the Higher Education Act of 2003 VLHORA was appointed to coordinate the quality assessments of programmes with a professional orientation. Quality assessments of programmes with an academic orientation are conducted in collaboration with VLIR.

The General Assembly of VLHORA appoints the secretary-general of the quality assurance agency. In order to ensure the involvement of the university colleges in the development of the quality assessment processes, VLHORA has established the Quality Assurance Forum and the Quality Assurance Steering Committee. The Quality Assurance Forum consists of the Quality Assurance coordinators of the 22 university colleges and the Quality Assurance Steering Committee consists of 12 quality assurance coordinators nominated by the university colleges and appointed by the Executive Board. The task of these two entities is to advise on internal and external quality assurance. They advise both VLHORA as an umbrella

organisation and VLHORA as a quality assurance agency. The budget for quality assurance functions of VLHORA is separated from the general VLHORA budget. The costs of the external assessments are to be paid by the university colleges in relation to the number of assessments carried out; they are not part of the yearly contributions of the university colleges to VLHORA as umbrella organisation.

4.3.3 Collaboration with the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR)

VLHORA and VLIR have both been appointed by law, to coordinate the external assessments of programmes at university colleges and universities. Each Agency is responsible for its respective sector but they share the responsibility for the assessments of programmes with an academic orientation and the programmes offered jointly by universities and university colleges. The two agencies have jointly developed and issued the "VLIR/VLHORA Educational Assessment Visit Guide", which is the basis of quality assurance procedures for all programmes. VLIR and VLHORA have worked closely together in the past and the responsible boards have recently decided to merge the two umbrella organizations. As a consequence the two quality assurance agencies will also be merged; although there is no legal basis for this yet. The Flemish Government wants this process to be completed by the end of 2010.

4.4 The VLHORA Assessment Method

Due to a change in legislation in Flanders, VLHORA has changed its assessment system once already, with the current system having been used since 2005. The processes and criteria for the assessments are described in detail in the „VLIR/VLHORA Educational Assessment Guide". The Guide is considered the most important working instrument for VLHORA itself, the institutions, and the expert panels.

The Criteria for the assessments are described in the assessment frameworks. VLHORA uses two types of framework, one general and one discipline-specific. The general framework has been established in accordance with the accreditation framework issued by NVAO, with the accreditation decision being based on the external assessment of the six themes defined in the general assessment framework. As these are rather broad, VLHORA also uses discipline-specific frameworks which are drawn up by the expert panel for the assessment of each individual and cluster of programmes.

The assessment procedures consist of three steps:

1. Self Evaluation

An overall procedure starts with a self-evaluation report written by the programme to be assessed. This should give a self-critical evaluation of the programme against the themes described in the general assessment framework, as well as giving some insight into possible future developments of the programmes.

Some of the programmes are assessed within clusters which may be of considerable size. For this reason the timeframe from the submission of the self-evaluation report to the actual on-site visit can take up to a year, although typically can be a lot less.

2. On-site visit with an external review panel

The programme to be assessed can nominate candidates for the panel. VLHORA then draws up a list of possible expert panels and the programme can identify their preferences with regard to the choice of peer leader. The panel consists of five members and includes an educational expert, and experts in the discipline as well as a student. The composition of the panel must be submitted to the Recognition Commission, which comes under the Flemish Government; the Commission has been appointed to ensure the independence of the review panels.

After the panel has been formally appointed they receive the self-evaluation report and draw up a discipline-specific framework, which is sent to the programme before the visit. The on-site visit lasts two and half days for each institution offering the programme. During the visit the programme may give the panel updated information. Updates may be necessary due to developments that have occurred since submission of the report. The panels are accompanied by secretaries, who are responsible for writing the assessment reports. The secretaries may be VLHORA staff or external secretaries mandated for the procedure. The on-site visit is concluded by an oral report in which the panel gives its initial feedback and may include specific recommendations for improvement. The institution offering the programme receives a first draft of the assessment report and may comment on the content of the report as well as correct possible factual errors. The panel considers the remarks before finalising its report. The institution then receives the final report for each specific programme (within a cluster) as well as a comparative chapter and a comparative assessment table.

3. Publication of the assessment report / application for accreditation

All assessment reports are published. The publication of the report is a condition for a programme to be able to apply for accreditation at NVAO. As mentioned above the publication of the report may take some time depending on the size of a cluster. After publication a programme has to apply for accreditation by NVAO within four months.

5 Compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines

5.1 ESG 3.1 - Use of external quality assurance procedures for higher education

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

Compliance with the Standards of Part 2 of the ESG are analysed in the following chapters. Compliance with these Standards is only relevant with regard to the overall compliance with Standard 3.1.

5.1.1 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.

Internal quality assurance is one of the six themes of the general assessment framework and is assessed according to 21 aspects. In the meetings the review panel learnt that the university colleges have had internal quality assurance systems for the past ten years; the university colleges feel that the most important reason for the external quality assurance procedure is to give them an external view on their internal measures in order to continuously improve their systems.

The panel considers that VLHORA **complies with standard 2.1.**

5.1.2 ESG 2.2 - Development of external quality assurance processes

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

The quality assurance processes of VLHORA have been determined in the Higher Education Act of 2003. On the basis of this law VLHORA established and issued the „VLIR/VLHORA Educational Assessment Visit Guide“. The document clearly states the procedure, the frameworks, and the criteria. It has been developed in collaboration and in consultation with all relevant partners. The review panel was very impressed by the fact that all interview partners had extensive knowledge of the document and its content. The guide seems to represent a „bible“ of assessment procedures to all partners involved.

The master programmes organised by the university colleges are currently in the process of strengthening the way they are embedded into research. The expert panel is concerned that the objectives and criteria for the development of these academic masters are not yet sufficiently clearly defined and suggests a more detailed regulation in the Educational Assessment Visits Guide. The review panel raised this question with the interviewees and

came to the conclusion that VLHORA, as well as its partners, are aware of the challenges involved and that it is subject of ongoing constructive discussions.

Whilst the panel considers that **VLHORA complies with standard 2.2**, it **recommends** that constructive approaches to wider engagement with the process of embedding research into the master programmes of the university colleges are sought, particularly with the rather short timescale within which the process is due to be completed.

5.1.3 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.

The criteria for the recommendations made by VLHORA with regard to accreditation decisions taken by NVAO are published in the Educational Assessment Guide. The general framework is, apart from minor changes, identical with the framework for accreditation issued by the accrediting body NVAO. The panel found no evidence that led to the conclusion that the criteria of the framework were unclear or applied inconsistently.

In addition to the general framework discipline-specific frameworks are also developed on a programme (cluster) by programme basis. Each discipline-specific framework is designed for an individual programme (or cluster) by the expert panel, in collaboration with the secretary/project manager. VLHORA has issued a special guide to help the expert panels with the development of such discipline-specific frameworks. A framework is established by the panel taking into account any relevant existing documents provided by the institution itself, the law (where regulated professions are concerned), and frameworks from former assessments. The discipline-specific framework is established after the self-evaluation phase with the programme undergoing the assessment receiving the framework before the site visit.

Initially this arrangement led the ENQA ESG panel to have some concerns in terms of both the timing of the development of the discipline specific frameworks (after the SER) and the potential for the introduction of inconsistency between discipline specific frameworks and their application.

During the visit however the review panel developed the view that the practical arrangements in place mitigate against inconsistency and that the timing is suited to the particular form of assessment. The panel also learnt that, as part of ongoing improvements, special frameworks defining the learning outcomes of the individual programmes are currently being developed.

Following extensive discussions and investigation the panel concludes that, in practice, **VLHORA complies with standard 2.3**.

5.1.4 ESG 2.4 - Process 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.

In evaluating this standard the panel has taken into account the fact that in Flanders the quality assurance processes are regulated by law. The responsible ministry predetermines the system applied by VLHORA. Within this strict legislative framework however the review panel found that the aims and objectives for the quality assurance processes have not been accurately defined. This was confirmed during the on-site visit when the review panel was interested to learn that, when questioned about the primary purpose(s) and aim(s) of quality assurance, the different panels interviewed, and particularly some of the key stakeholder partners, did not share a common view. With regard to the question of who should be the primary beneficiary from the quality assurance processes, answers ranged from „society“, „institutions“, and „students“, to „the law“. In the opinion of the review panel this confusion may both stem from and be manifested by the mission statement of VLHORA. VLHORA has developed its processes according to the legal prerequisites, and the processes are clearly suitable for the quality assessment of programmes. The review panel felt however that somewhere, between the legal framework and the design of the processes, VLHORA had omitted to define the specific aims and objectives of the two functions it carries out – quality assurance and quality improvement – both within an overarching umbrella of activities concerned with supporting and promoting university colleges.

Bearing these factors in mind, the panel finds VLHORA **substantially, but not completely, complies with standard 2.4**

Within the legal framework in which VLHORA has to operate it is clear that the quality assurance system ‘works’, however the panel **recommends** that VLHORA and its various key stakeholders reflect further on, and identify more clearly, the aims and objectives that it is seeking to achieve through its processes. This will be important as it moves into a further period of change with the amalgamation of VLHORA with VLIR.⁴

5.1.5 ESG 2.5 - Reporting

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

Reports are published on the VLHORA website after the completion of assessments. As the assessments are per programme and not per institution the time between an on-site visit and the actual publication of the report can be substantial. The information in the report may hence no longer reflect the actual situation in the institutions. During the interviews the

⁴ See also the comments and recommendations of the review panel on Standard 3.5, Mission Statement, p. 17.

review panel raised this matter and found that both VLHORA staff and experts, in particular, are aware of this problem, but at the moment could not see a solution. Stakeholders noted that they valued the comparative nature of the overview of clusters of programmes.

The review panel found that the reports are sometimes quite long and as such not written with a general public in mind. This impression was confirmed by some of the interviewees who stated that there have been complaints about the reports being too 'academic'. Many of the interviewees suspected that reports were therefore not read by people unrelated to the programmes. There are however a few exceptions, when reports were picked up by journalists and discussed in newspapers. When questioned about the intended readership of the reports there was no consistent or coherent answer from different groups of interviewees.

Although the reports are published, the panel feels that there should be greater clarity with regard to the intended readership.

Bearing these factors in mind, the panel finds VLHORA **substantially, but not completely complies with standard 2.5.**

The panel **recommends** that VLHORA consider the introduction of a short summary, which would be a useful instrument for students and the interested public to obtain easy access to the most important findings about a specific programme.

5.1.6 ESG 2.6 - Follow-up procedures

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

An important part of the assessment reports are the recommendations for improvement. The follow-up of these recommendations must be taken into account in the next cycle of assessments (after eight years). There is however no formal follow-up of recommendations within the procedure of VLHORA where accreditations have been achieved satisfactorily. However, a number of other measures exist, outside of the formal VLHORA processes, to follow the implementation of recommendations made in VLHORA reports. In their application for accreditation by NVAO programmes can, on a voluntary basis, submit an action plan on how they want to implement the given recommendations. More significantly however, each institution has to submit an annual report to the (Flemish) government in which they state if and how the recommendations of the expert panels were followed. The responsible commissioner in the ministry has the competency (but not the obligation) to ask for a full report on the implementation of the recommendations.

The review panel finds that these external measures are a suitable replacement for a specific and predetermined VLHORA follow-up procedure. However a clearly defined follow-up procedure within the quality-assurance procedures of VLHORA is missing and thus the panel comes to the conclusion that VLHORA **substantially but not completely complies**

with ESG standard 2.6. As a consequence the panel **recommends** that VLHORA introduces a clearly defined, predetermined follow-up procedure.

5.1.7 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 advanced.

The assessment cycles are defined in the Higher Education Act of 2003. Programmes have to be assessed every eight years.

The panel considered a cycle of eight year to be somewhat on the long side, particularly in comparison with other practices in Europe. This view was also shared by some of the interviewees but as the cycle is predefined by law the question was not investigated any further.

VLHORA **complies with ESG 2.7.**

5.1.8 ESG 2.8 - System-wide analysis

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

Similar programmes are assessed within a cluster and the assessment report includes a horizontal analysis of the clustered programmes, in addition to the individual assessments for each programme. VLHORA is convinced that this leads to a comparability of the assessment results and stimulates the overall consistency of the processes.

The panel shared the view that VLHORA should have a broader understanding of the application of this standard. Discussions during the site visit provided insight into discussions within VLHORA about how more effective use could be made of the information within reports to support wider and more generic aspects of quality improvement. Such discussions indicated that consideration be given to the possibility of comparative analyses not only within clusters but also across them. This could provide valuable input into improvement activities and support consistency of processes across the sector. Whether the current VLHORA resources could meet such an ambition is another matter. Nevertheless the panel learnt during the on-site visit that VLHORA does make some horizontal conclusions in its annual reports.

Notwithstanding these comments, the panel find VLHORA **complies with ESG 2.8.**

Although the above paragraphs include a number of recommendations and reflections, and some findings of substantial rather than full compliance regarding the standards of section 2, the panel is of the view that overall VLHORA **complies with ESG 3.1.**

5.2 ESG 3.2 - Official status

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

The Higher Education Act of 2003 gives VLHORA the responsibility to co-ordinate the external quality assessments of programmes with a professional orientation and, together with VLIR, the assessment of programmes with an academic orientation within the framework of an association.

For the review panel it is clear that VLHORA operates on a clear legal basis and is recognised by the public authorities. Fulfilment of this standard was evident to the review panel and therefore not discussed any further.

VLHORA complies with ESG 3.2.

5.3 ESG 3.3 - Activities

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

VLHORA has been appointed by law to co-ordinate and supervise quality assessment procedures of study programmes. The cycle of these assessments have been pre-defined by law.

For the review panel it is obvious that VLHORA undertakes quality assurance activities on a regular basis. Evidence for this is the overview of the assessments that have been conducted since 2005 and the rather ambitious time path for the assessments still to come.

The panel finds that VLHORA **complies with ESG 3.3.**

5.4 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 manner with appropriate provision for the development of their processes and procedures.

All quality assessments that VLHORA conducts are charged to the institution concerned with the cost of a quality assessment currently fixed at 19,700 Euros per programme. When a programme is assessed within a cluster during the same on-site visit the costs are increased by 7,700 Euro per additional programme. For the financial year 2008 VLHORA has a programme of assessments resulting in a total budget of 1,357,324 Euros.

VLHORA is however also an umbrella organisation and receives funding for its non-assessment activities through the yearly contributions from its constituent institutions. The two budgets are separated but the General Assembly of VLHORA has to approve the budget

of that part of VLHORA that acts as a quality agency. The review panel found that the financial resources seem to be adequate.

The panel noted however that the government does not contribute towards the funding of VLHORA even though the quality assurance processes it undertakes are mandatory by law. In discussion this aspect was met with some scepticism by some of the discussion partners; whilst in theory providing an income stream independent of the member university colleges some feared that direct funding by government might interfere with the (real / perceived) independence of VLHORA, as well as the institutions.

VLHORA has at the moment a permanent staff of 10 persons. Additionally VLHORA works with external secretaries who are mandated for specific procedures. Since 2005 the number of permanent staff has been increased constantly and there are plans to hire more personnel within the next few years.

Looking at the considerable workload the internal and external staff of VLHORA has to manage, the review panel was very impressed by the professionalism and the commitment the staff showed. The staff seems to be satisfied with the working conditions, and the review panel learnt that the recent additions to the team have been very well received. The staff also stressed the importance of the external secretaries who help to manage the workload. The high quality of the staff and their professional approach to their work was confirmed in all of the meetings with the review panel.

The panel finds that VLHORA **complies with ESG 3.4**.

5.5 ESG 3.5 - Mission Statement

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

The mission statement of VLHORA is included in the document „Internal Quality Assurance of VLHORA as a Quality Assurance Agency“ and reads as follows:

“VLHORA wants to ensure high standards in the organisation of the quality assessment of university college programmes. Therefore VLHORA uses professional assessment panels and entrusts them with a two-fold mission:

- to render an independent, transparent, argued judgement based on internationally accepted criteria on Bachelor’s and Master programmes organised by the Flemish university colleges, in compliance with the VLIR-VLHORA assessment protocol.
- to formulate clear advice for improvement“.

The panel noted that although the mission statement is formally ‘publicly available’ it is not easily accessible, and additionally had some difficulties with its form and content. It is not entirely clear whether the mission statement refers to the quality assurance ‘arm’ of VLHORA, and / or its role within the wider remit of the umbrella activities that VLHORA undertakes.

Mission statements are generally defined as brief statements that explain an organisation's core values and purposes. The panel feels that the current mission statement over focuses on the explanation of its processes but lacks a clear definition of the purpose, goals and objectives of VLHORA. It might be argued that these may be 'self evident' as they are to all intents and purposes set by the legal framework in which VLHORA operates, but to an 'external eye' it is not entirely clear where and how the quality assurance and quality improvement functions are located and interact.

The panel considers that, VLHORA **substantially but not completely complies with ESG 3.5**, and **recommends** that VLHORA review its mission statement and include a description of the purposes, goals and objectives of its specific quality assurance roles, as well as of the relationship with its relevant stakeholders and society.

5.6 ESG 3.6 - Independence

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

VLHORA is a twofold organisation; there is VLHORA the umbrella organisation that acts as an interest group for the university colleges, but there is also within this VLHORA the quality assurance agency that coordinates independent quality assessments.

The General Assembly, the Executive Board and the Quality Steering Committee of VLHORA all consist of people who only come from the university colleges. External stakeholders are not part of these bodies, although students are invited to the meetings. They are not full members but can fully participate. Additionally there are observers who can attend the meetings when appropriate.

To guarantee the independence of its quality assurance processes VLHORA has introduced some rules limiting the influence of these bodies on the actual quality assessments themselves. The bodies cannot intervene in the selection of the assessment panels, the content of the assessment reports, or the resulting recommendations of the assessments. However, the bodies do ratify the procedure(s), advise on policies of quality assurance and, in the case of the General Assembly, hire the Secretary General of the quality assurance agency.

At the beginning of the on-site visit the review panel (especially the experts coming from abroad) had some doubts about the 'independence' of such a system. They feared that university colleges could influence the quality assessments through a number of ways. During the site visit, however, it became quite clear that all view both the quality assurance activities of VLHORA, and in particular the activities of the panels, as independent. VLHORA has very strict selection criteria for experts who have to state their independence twice in the process, but more substantially the experts and panels are confirmed by another and external body - the Recognition Commission for Higher Education.

VLHORA has been appointed by law to conduct the quality assessments and with this the Flemish legislator has decided that the quality assessments are to be conducted by the sector itself. From an external viewpoint this setting is unusual particularly since there is no formal external stakeholder input on the various committees of VLHORA the umbrella organisation or VLHORA the quality assurance agency, which are provided only from the university college sector itself – which is being assessed. But in the meetings it became clear that this system is working very well and that the independence of the reports, recommendations and conclusions is assured at all times. VLHORA has been very careful to separate the work of the umbrella organisation from the work of the quality assurance agencies. This is also seen through the strict separation of the two budgets. At the moment VLHORA is in the process of establishing an advisory board that consists of external stakeholders, and whilst this board will not be part of the formal structure and as such cannot actually influence it may and should give regular and concrete advise on policies, strategies and processes of VLHORA.

The panel finds that VLHORA **complies with ESG 3.6.**

The review panel suggests that although the system is predefined by law and seems to work rather well, independence would be more secure if there were greater involvement of the external stakeholders in the different bodies of VLHORA. The review panel commends the establishment of the Advisory Board but **recommends** the introduction of a VLIR/VLHORA steering committee with external stakeholders as members. Also the review panel is of the opinion that the division between VLHORA as an umbrella organization and VLHORA the quality assurance agency should be more explicit and be more clearly reflected in the statutes of VLHORA.

5.7 ESG 3.7 - External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies

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 processes;

an external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate, (a) student member(s) and site visit as decided by the agency;

publication of a report, including any decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes;

a follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report.

Processes, criteria and procedures used by VLHORA are predefined and publicly available; this has already been established in chapters 5.1.2 and 5.1.6 of this report.

The first three steps of a quality assurance procedure mentioned in the standard are clearly part of VLHORA's processes⁵. A follow-up procedure does not exist within the VLHORA assessment processes, however there is a substantial equivalent that operates within the legal context that VLHORA acts. Comments and conclusion of the review panel on this subject can be found in chapter 5.1.6 of this report.

Whilst in a strict sense VLHORA does not have a follow-up procedure within its own activities it is the panel's view that the overall quality assurance / legal framework in which VLHORA operates does provide an equivalent, and there is thus **compliance with ESG 3.7**.

The panel **recommends** however that the annual reporting by the university colleges to the Commissioner is in some way integrated within VLHORA information gathering, thus 'closing the loop' more explicitly with regard to this standard.

5.8 ESG 3.8 - Accountability procedures

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| Agencies should have in place procedures for their own accountability. |
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VLHORA has introduced different measures for its accountability:

In 2005 VLHORA introduced an internal quality assurance system (IQA) with the relevant documents published on the website of VLHORA.

VLHORA systematically conducts surveys among the different partners involved in the assessments. These surveys are sent out three months after publication of the reports. The external secretaries and the peer leaders of the panel also give their opinions in formal interviews with VLHORA.

The independence of the review panels is meticulously watched over by VLHORA. VLHORA has different internal as well as one external mechanism (in the form of the Recognition Commission) in place that aim to guarantee the independence of the review panels. The panel was impressed by the firm belief and commitment that the panel members expressed their accountability for their roles, and their independence through the nomination, appointment and panel activities.

In order to involve more external stakeholders in VLHORA procedures, an Advisory Board consisting only of external stakeholders is currently being established. The Advisory Board will be able to advise on the yearly work plan, the objectives, and the preparations of strategic policy statements.

The university colleges through their programmes have two opportunities to comment on their assessment reports. It is the sole competency of the expert panels to decide whether these comments are included in the final assessment report or not. At the request of the institutions VLHORA is now in the process of establishing a formal appeal procedure. In case of a conflict an independent appeal panel will in the future decide an outcome.

⁵ see Chapter 3 of this report.

VLHORA clearly has procedures for its own accountability in place. The review panel finds that internal accountability is provided through different measures (surveys, IQA) but for full external accountability, although VLHORA is developing new processes (appeal system, advisory board) the structures are not in place yet and therefore full accountability is still to be achieved. The newly established Advisory Board is a first step but the review panel feels that VLHORA could and should consider being more open to external viewpoints. The panel is of the opinion that VLHORA would find it useful to reflect on the wider expectations of accountability, and identify the specific roles and responsibilities of each stage in its procedures. The simple question – ‘Who is responsible for the VLHORA recommendation to NVAO?’ did not meet with a single (or simple) answer from all involved in the various activities.

Because of the above the panel finds that at this moment **VLHORA is substantially, but not completely, in compliance with ESG 3.8.**

6 Reflections on VLHORA’s national position and recommendations for improvement

Apart from the compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines the panel was asked to reflect on the national position of VLHORA and to give recommendations for improvement.

The review panel’s assessments and conclusions on the fulfilment of the ESG inevitably included consideration of the national ‘position’ of the quality assurance agency activities of VLHORA, and the legal contexts within which it works. This is made more interesting for VLHORA with regards to its relationship to not only Flemish law but also the requirements of NVAO, which was established as an organization working across national boundaries and (similar but different) legal frameworks.

In these complex circumstances, and because of VLHORA’s limited ‘freedom of action’ with regard to actions and easy changes in relation to a (small) number of the ESG, the panel concluded that it would be difficult to make specific and immediate practical recommendations for improvement in areas where VLHORA was bound by external constraints, although it encourages VLHORA to work within the legal framework as far as is currently practical and, with its key partners, reflect on any potential beneficial changes to that framework.

Nevertheless the panel has taken the opportunity of VLHORA’s request and has made a number of (more formal) ‘recommendations’ and a number of ‘reflections’ that it hopes VLHORA – and also importantly, VLHORA’s stakeholders and partners – will find useful. Because of the critical importance of ‘context’ in which VLHORA operates these recommendations and reflections are ‘embedded’ within the various relevant sections, rather than being presented in an isolated form, or merely repeated, here.

7 Conclusion

In the light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the review panel is satisfied that in the performance of its functions, VLHORA is compliant with most of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area regarding Sections 2 and 3. In a few cases the panel finds VLHORA substantially but not completely compliant and to assist VLHORA has provided some formal recommendations, and also some suggestions that VLHORA may wish to reflect on.

The Panel recommends to the Board of ENQA that VLHORA should have its full membership confirmed to a further period of five years.

The review panel acknowledges the readiness of VLHORA to take the appropriate actions and implement the recommendations of the review panel.

Annex 1 – Programme of the on-site visit

Day 1: Tuesday 30 September

| Session | Time | Group |
|----------------|---------------|--|
| S1 | 08.30 – 09.45 | <p>Presidency and rest of management team</p> <p>Mr Bert Hoogewijs, President Mr Toon Martens, Vice-president Mr Erwin Samson, secretary of the board Ms Ann Verreth, Secretary General</p> |
| S2 | 09.45 – 11.00 | <p>Permanent Secretariat of VLHORA</p> <p>-Ms Klara De Wilde, quality manager-coordinator -Mr Floris Lammens, quality manager -Ms Sofie Landuyt, quality manager -Ms Lucia van Hoof, quality manager -Ms Jo De Grave, quality manager -Mr Filip Lammens, internal secretary to panels and information technology services -Mr Thomas Jans internal secretary to panels -Ms Myriam Slock, management assistant and administrative coordinator -Ms Lore Solemé, in charge of administrative dossiers concerning quality assurance</p> |
| Break | | |
| S3 | 11.30 – 12.15 | <p>External secretaries to panels</p> <p>-Ms Magda Kirsch</p> |

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| | | -Mr Winfried Flapper |
| | 12.15 – 1.30 | Review panel lunch VLHORA-premises |
| S4 | 13.30 – 14.30 | Members of the Accreditation Commission-NVAO -Mr Guido Langouche (board member NVAO) -Mr Guy Aelterman (vice president NVAO) -Mr Leendert Klaassen (board member NVAO) |
| S5 | 14.30 – 15.30 | Steering committee on quality assurance -Mr Paul Garré (Quality manager HUB) -Mr Lucien Bollaert (vice-president register committee EQAR, Head of education department HOWEST) -Mr Michel Maricau (Quality manager KHBO) -Ms Saskia Lieveyns (Quality manager Erasmus University College, Brussels) -Ms Hilde Sels (Quality manager University College Kempen) -Ms Vera Pletincx (Quality manager University College Artevelde Ghent) -Ms An Kint (Quality manager University College Antwerp) |
| Break | | |

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| S6 | 16.00 – 17.00 | <p>Students in expert team</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Ms Julie Defreaye (VVS, board member) -Ms Hanne Vermeiren (VVS, member of Staff) management University College West-Flanders) -Mr Thomas Tomme (Student Master Industrial Sciences University College West-Flanders) -Mr Christophe De Jaegher (student teacher education University College Artevelde Ghent) -Mr Ward Jonckheere (Student Master Industrial sciences University College West-Flanders) |
| S7 | 17.00 – 18.00 | <p>Flemish University colleges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Ms Hilde Meysman (programme manager teacher education, university college Artevelde Ghent) -Mr Walter Sevenhans (Head of department Industrial sciences University College Karel De Grote, Antwerp) -Ms Lieve Paternoster (Head of department, University College Plantijn Antwerp) -Ms Gisèle De Schepper (Quality coordinator, University College of Mechelen) -Ms Pascale Degroote (head of the arts department of the university college of Antwerp) |

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| | | -Ms Mia Eeckhout (programme manager BIO-sciences university college Gent) |
| | 18.00 – 19.30 | Review Panel meeting |
| | 20.30 – | Review panel dinner Restaurant : Aux armes de Bruxelles Beenhouwersstraat 13 1000 Brussel Tel: 02 511 55 50 www.armebrux.be |

Day 2: Wednesday 1 October

| Session | Time | Group |
|---------|-------------|--|
| S8 | 8.30 – 9.45 | <p>Members of Ministry, Parliament and VLOR (Strategic advisory council on education in Flanders)</p> <p>-Ms Monica Van Kerrebrouck, president of the commission on education in the Flemish parliament</p> <p>-Member of the Recognition Commission (To be confirmed)</p> <p>-Mr Tom de Keyzer (advisor minister of education)</p> |

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| | | -Ms Linda De Kock (ministry, department on higher education) -Ms Isabelle Deridder (Staf member VLOR) |
| S9 | 9.45 – 10.45 | VLIR (Flemish Council of universities) -Mr Eddy Van Avermaet (President of steering committee on quality assurance VLIR) -Ms Marleen Bronders (Coordinator Quality assurance VLIR) -Ms Veerle Hulpiau (Member steering committee quality assurance VLIR) -Ms Rosette S’Jegers (Director VLIR) |
| Break | | |
| S10 | 11.15 – 12.15 | Rector ´s Conference -Mr Patrick Blondé (Rector University College-maritime institute Antwerp) -Mr Johan Veeckman (Rector University College Artevelde Ghent) -Mr Luc Vandevelde (Rector University College Erasmus Brussels) -Mr Maurice Vaes (Rector University College KHK) -Mr Frank Baert (rector University College Sint-Lieven Ghent) |
| | 12.15 – 13.45 | Review Panel lunch |

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| | | VLHORA-premises |
| S11 | 13.45 – 15.00 | <p>External Experts (national and international)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Mr Peter Verleg (peer leader review panel on teacher education, NL) -Mr Jo Box (member of peer review panel on maritime sciences, NL) -Mr Romain Hulpia (peer leader several panels, B) -Mr Michael Gore (member of peer review panel on lab-technology and nutritional sciences, UK) -Mr Martin Valcke (member of several panels, education expert, B) -Mr Paul Bertels (peer leader of review panel industrial sciences, B) |
| S12 | 15.00 – 15.45 | Extra meeting (if necessary to clarify something with any person) |
| Break | | |
| | 16.15 – 17.30 | Review panel meeting |
| S13 | 17.30 – 18.00 | Preliminary oral report with the results of the external peer-review |