

# **VLIR-UOS selection system**

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**Applicable to VLIR-UOS calls,  
launched as from November 2021**

# FYP2 VLIR-UOS selection system

## Content

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>Expectations from DGD .....</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Benchmark study (2020).....</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Main changes in the FYP2 selection system .....</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Differentiation in selection systems .....</i>	<i>2</i>
<b>Generic elements of the selection system.....</b>	<b>3</b>
1. <i>Eligibility and selection criteria.....</i>	<i>3</i>
1.1. <i>Eligibility criteria.....</i>	<i>3</i>
1.2. <i>General selection criteria and descriptors for projects, and scoring and weighing .....</i>	<i>4</i>
1.3. <i>General selection criteria for scholarships .....</i>	<i>12</i>
2. <i>Selection and assessment commissions for projects.....</i>	<i>14</i>
2.1. <i>Organising principle for the selection commissions for projects .....</i>	<i>14</i>
2.2. <i>Composition and size of the selection / assessment commissions .....</i>	<i>14</i>
2.3. <i>Deontological code of conduct .....</i>	<i>16</i>
2.4. <i>Flow chart FYP2 selection / assessment commissions .....</i>	<i>17</i>
3. <i>Selection procedure and specificities per programme .....</i>	<i>18</i>
3.1. <i>ICP Connect .....</i>	<i>19</i>
3.2. <i>Assessment criteria ICP Connect Stage 2 .....</i>	<i>20</i>

# Introduction

## Expectations from DGD

VLIR-UOS is an umbrella organization that organises calls for proposals, provides support during the identification and formulation of project proposals respecting neutrality, ensures the independent selection of projects, monitors their implementation and evaluates their results for learning, steering and accountability. VLIR-UOS has integrated the quality criteria for development with other concerns such as scientific quality into a sound, equitable system for selection of academic development projects.

The document '*Specificities of the programme format for ARES-CCD and VLIR-UOS*' (DGD, December 2020) specifies that in its actor programme, VLIR-UOS has to present '*outcomes in which their quality can be observed with regard to the criteria of Relevance, Coherence, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Sustainability, Impact, Partnerships, Synergies and Learning Outcomes. The expectations relating to each of these criteria, however, shall be adapted to take into account their particular characteristics as the umbrella structures of the academic development cooperation. VLIR-UOS will be required to demonstrate how the expectations specified in the "standard" format of presenting programmes 2022-2026 for all of the qualitative criteria are or will be integrated into the output/project selection process. The organisation is required to integrate the identified expectations according to the most appropriate structure in their view. The last selections having taken place prior to submitting the programme may serve to illustrate the demonstration and running of the system in general*'.

Following up on this prerequisite, this annex focuses particularly on the generic elements of the selection system applied by VLIR-UOS as well as on the specificities for the individual programmes. The principles and criteria underpinning the selection system of the various programmes of VLIR-UOS are largely similar and will be described in the first section of this annex. Subsequently, specificities related to the selection system for each of the programmes will be provided in the subsequent sections.

Due to the Corona measures based delay in the realisation of FYP1 project results, DGD approved FYP1 to be prolonged, with FYP2 being suspended correspondingly. As a consequence, no calls have been launched since 2019. Given the fundamental changes in the conceptual framework and design of the FYP2 portfolio, no reference can be made at this stage to recent selections.

## Benchmark study (2020)

Since DGD has always been participating in selection commission meetings, DGD has profound knowledge of and experience with the VLIR-UOS selection system. At many occasions DGD expressed its appraisal of the quality of the selection system and the functioning of VLIR-UOS selection commissions over the years.

In view of the strive for further optimisation, VLIR-UOS ordered a benchmark study of its selection system in 2019, performed by Syspons in 2020. This study showed that the selection system of VLIR-UOS is quite performant in comparison with other organisations (DAAD, FWO, ERC, FWO, ARES ..) and that no fundamental changes were needed. A number of suggestions for optimisation were made.

The main conclusions and recommendations are :

- The system with external commissions with mixed composition and expertise is to be maintained as also the provided training sessions and the approach with generic selection criteria.

- Syspons advanced a change in the scoring system and the re-introduction of a 2-stage selection procedure for TEAM projects with an improved peer review system -based on an independent pool of discipline based peer reviewers- as a way to keep the workload for commissions manageable, increase efficiency of the selection process and guarantee equal treatment to applicants. Also for other programmes with substantial budget multi-stage selection steps are advisable but for programmes of more limited duration a slimmer procedure is advised.
- It was suggested to look into the selection criteria but without clear recommendations on how to proceed except that it would be important to look into the relevance criterion and the description of impact and sustainability.
- VLIR-UOS should further continue with its training sessions for selection commission members and install a culture of learning via its M&E processes.
- The importance of feedback to applicants was considered a strong point and the efforts to improve on this should be continued.

## Main changes in the FYP2 selection system

The main changes in the selection system are either related to the recommendations of the benchmark study or to changes in the FYP2 conceptual framework following the alignment to Agenda 2030, the switch to a thematic Joint Strategic Framework on Higher Education and Science for Sustainable Development (tJSF HES4SD), with ARES and ITM and new policy priorities.

Main changes per topic

1. The organising principle of the commissions: focus on programme commissions taking into account FYP2 being based on types of programmes as outcome, instead of country programmes, due to the switch to a thematic JSF. The system of regional commissions was, however, maintained for SI/TEAM based on the expectance of high numbers of proposals and the need for strong regional expertise and balanced selection over countries.
2. Composition of commissions: no major changes except for the fact that the need for expertise in the commissions on SDG principles, Theory of Change concepts and transversal themes (gender, environment) has become bigger, as well as gender balance and equal participation of local experts. Revised selection criteria and descriptors taking into account the SDG principles (LNOB, multistakeholder partnerships and interconnectedness); transversal and priority themes, the operationalisation of policy priorities related to interinstitutional cooperation and the specificity of projects managed by Universities of applied Sciences and arts with a focus on practice-based approaches in research and education. The criteria have been reclustered from 6 (quality, relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, sustainability) into 4 criteria (relevance and coherence, quality of project design, implementation set-up, impact & sustainability), thereby still respecting the OECD-DAC criteria.

The document describing the selection system still has to be finetuned, with a bigger focus on providing information from the perspective of a possible applicant. This will be done in the coming months in view of the upcoming calls later in 2021-2022.

## Differentiation in selection systems

The VLIR-UOS selection system is applied for most of the FYP2 outcomes, based, except for the Global Minds programme, on competitive calls within the following outcome programmes: SI and TEAM projects, Institutional University Cooperation projects (IUC), Education, individual scholarships and

Networks (ESN), and Bridging Science Society (BSS).. Distinction is made between the selection of projects and of scholarships. As to the latter, selection is decentralised either to the ICP Connect / ITP project promoters or, in case of embedded scholarships, to the project promoters of the respective partnership, with the partner HE&SI taking the lead.

The academic criteria are defined by the respective HE&SIs, both for individual and embedded scholarships, whereas the scholarship criteria are based on a common set of VLIR-UOS criteria to which still other criteria can be added by the respective project stakeholders.

This annex mainly focuses on the selection system for the selection of projects responding to VLIR-UOS competitive calls for proposals. An overview will first be given of the basic characteristics of the VLIR-UOS selection system, followed by a more detailed overview of the specific selection system per programme.

## Generic elements of the selection system

The VLIR-UOS selection system has 3 main features:

1. Eligibility and selection criteria
2. Selection or assessment commissions
3. Selection procedure.

### 1. Eligibility and selection criteria

All proposals will be selected against the same set of 4 selection criteria and for each call eligibility criteria apply.

#### 1.1. Eligibility criteria

Eligibility criteria define whether a proposal meets the minimum criteria to be accepted to enter the selection process. Each call for proposals defines clear eligibility criteria, using the following sections where appropriate. This practice is common within the academic community.

In comparison to FYP1, the number of formal eligibility rules has been limited with the eligibility check to be reduced to a strict minimum whereby appraisal is mainly content based and thus delegated to the selection commissions.

In case of VLIR-UOS calls for proposals, the following eligibility criteria apply:

<b>Eligibility of applicants</b>	<p>Eligibility of Flemish and local (co)promoters and eligibility of Flemish and local (co)partner institutions. (see detail under section 4 specificities per programme)</p> <p>Depending on the specific programme and/or call, differentiation is possible in terms of profile and commitments of partner institutions, level of interinstitutional collaboration expected, etc. Guidelines will be included in the conceptual frameworks per programme and in call documents.</p>
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<b>Eligibility of budget and implementation period</b>	Maximum budget is not exceeded Maximum implementation period is not exceeded
<b>Eligibility of countries</b>	List of eligible partner countries Differentiation per programme, (see annex 21), and possibly per call. Specific policy priorities, next to the FYP2 policy priorities, are laid down prior to the launch of a new project call
<b>Eligibility of submission modalities</b>	Timely and complete submission, through the ICOS of the university (association), and respect for formats and other possible formality guidelines (max. number of pages, font, ...).

Eligibility control is for most programmes performed via a 2-stage procedure whereby proposals are submitted to VLIR-UOS by the ICOS of the Flemish university association), after validation by the ICOS (Institutional coordinators for development cooperation, i.e. the VLIR-UOS focal points at the Flemish universities). Before submitting, the ICOS will be invited to check a number of institution related eligibility criteria listed in the call (e.g. does the Flemish promotor have a mandate at the Flemish institution for as long as the duration of the project?). By submitting the proposals, the ICOS confirm the eligibility of the proposal. An administrative eligibility check is done at the level of VLIR-UOS, based on a number of eligibility requirements which define whether a proposal can be accepted to enter the selection process (yes/no). A proposal which does not meet all eligibility requirements will be declared ineligible by the Bureau UOS and be rejected from the selection procedure. The submitters of non-eligible proposals will be informed by VLIR-UOS.

## **1.2. General selection criteria and descriptors for projects, and scoring and weighing**

### **1.2.1. Implementation of FYP2 ambitions in revised selection criteria and descriptors**

Covid-19 changed the world drastically, highlighting the role of science and international cooperation to tackle global and local problems, with data and digitalization creating new opportunities for equal partnerships.

Similar to the previous FYP, the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development and associated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) serve as the main reference point. VLIR-UOS is committed to meaningfully mainstreaming the 3 SDG principles of leaving no one behind, interconnectedness and multi-stakeholder partnerships, throughout its ambitions, policies, programme, portfolio, partnerships and scholarships. The universal nature of Agenda 2030 provides entry points for HE&SIs to incorporate global citizenship education, decolonization & equal partnerships, and a broader understanding of sustainable development into their threefold mission: research, education, and service to society. Policy themes have become more important: the VLIR-UOS gender policy was translated into a guiding framework for these calls aiming at mainstreaming gender throughout all new projects. A similar policy framework will be developed for environmental sustainability.

The focus of Agenda 2030 on meaningful impact through multi-stakeholder partnerships resonates with the FYP2 ambition “Connect4Change” to focus on cooperation among and beyond academic actors (CONNECT), societal impact (valorisation), and collective learning.

These policy ambitions have been translated in the project selection criteria and descriptors for all programmes. That way VLIR-UOS wants to stimulate new projects to **capitalize** on former and/or other relevant projects in the same context or topic, and to commit to **interinstitutional cooperation** among and beyond academic actors. It will be an added value in the competitive selection of projects if **different Flemish or partner HE&SIs** will be involved in a proposal, either universities, universities of applied sciences and arts or both. In case of TEAM projects, an extra budget of 20.000 EUR can be applied for, as an extra incentive. As of now, each call will be accompanied by a list of ideas & request for advice and/or partnership from third parties (other development actors (e.g. NGOs, VVOB, Enabel, ...), private sector, ...) addressed to academic stakeholders, whereby VLIR-UOS will function as platform and broker to stimulate **multi-actor partnerships**. We expect all projects to be based on a genuine and evidence-based context and stakeholder analysis with attention to **gender, vulnerable people and the environmental impact**. In their approach projects should have attention for gender and vulnerable groups and respect for decent work and human rights. Projects should address the interconnectedness of the sustainable development challenges through e.g. multidisciplinary or systems approaches, and have a clear valorisation strategy focussing not only on scientific impact, but more importantly also on societal impact.

Specific objective of FYP2 is to mobilize young/new academics to engage in “sharing minds, changing lives”. This is why the number of project (proposals) per promoter has been limited for SI and TEAM. In case of ex aequo ranking in the selection of projects, preference will be given to academics without prior experience with VLIR-UOS, and to projects from the minority gender group and/or gender specific projects.

### 1.2.2. Selection criteria for projects and their relation to the OECD-DAC criteria

#### FYP2 selection criteria

All project proposals will be assessed and selected based on the **four selection criteria** displayed in the table below. In FYP1 VLIR-UOS used 6 criteria. In order to simplify the selection procedure, while making it at the same time more coherent and transparent, the selection criteria were modified in view of FYP2. The major change is the alignment to Agenda 2030, the mainstreaming of SDG principles and the transversal and priority themes of DGD, as well as the VLIR-UOS policy priority of interinstitutional cooperation

The selection criteria are further translated into a list of general **descriptors** which provide applicants and members of the selection body with objective interpretations of the criteria.

The general descriptors have been adapted and finetuned for the different programmes and/or selection rounds (e.g. SI projects easy access, explorative in comparison with higher ambition level of TEAM). In view of specific policy priorities of VLIR-UOS, descriptors can be changed for specific calls. **The following overview are thus the general descriptors whereas the specific adaptation for ICP is included under section 3.2.**

Criteria	Definition	Descriptors
Relevance and coherence of the project	<i>The extent to which the proposal responds to beneficiaries', global, country, and partner/institution needs, policies (relevance) and fits with the programme Theory of Change (ToC) and within the institution/context (coherence)</i>	<p>1.1 The proposal aligns with the Agenda 2030, national and local policies, as well as with the programme ToC</p> <p>1.2 The proposal is based on a genuine and evidence-based context and stakeholder analysis with attention to gender, vulnerable people (LNOB) and the environment</p> <p>1.3 The proposal is compatible/links up with or capitalizes on other related (including preceding) initiatives in the same context or topic (a.o. by taking into account the VLIR-UOS country frameworks) and address-es/seeks for synergies, complementarities, interlink-ages and consistency with these initiatives (INT &amp; MSP)</p> <p>1.4 The proposal demonstrates local ownership and is in line with the local partners' priorities</p>
Quality of the project design	<i>The extent to which a proposal presents a convincing project strategy</i>	<p>2.1 The proposal presents a realistic and applicable Theory of Change (ToC) narrative, outlining the change desired (e.g. at household, community or societal level), the needs to be addressed, the intended pathways toward change, and makes underlying assumptions or preconditions explicit (e.g. risk analysis)</p> <p>2.2 Linked to the ToC narrative, the proposal articulates a convincing project logic, with a clear and realistic flow between a long-term sustainable development objective/impact level), the outcomes expected from the project, and the envisaged intermediate changes (=results) by formulating activities/identifying deliverables linked to one or more of the six standard VLIR-UOS project domains</p> <p>2.3 The proposal is original, creative, innovative (scientific, academic or pedagogical excellence)</p> <p>2.4 The proposal elaborates an appropriate and feasible (scientific, academic or pedagogical) methodology or approach which recognizes/addresses the interconnectedness of the sustainable development challenges (e.g. multidisciplinary or systems approaches) (INT)</p>
Implementation set-up of the project	<i>The extent to which the proposal presents a strong plan and partnership for the execution of the project</i>	<p>3.1 The project ToC is translated into a clear planning (which will facilitate effective project execution, follow-up and monitoring through a convincing set of indicators) and adequate measures to deal in an adaptive way with the most important uncertainties (assumptions/risks), with attention to gender, vulnerable groups and environment.</p> <p>3.2 The proposal is cost-effective, the budget is reasonable and justified</p> <p>3.3 The proposal involves an appropriate mix of partners (persons and their organisations) (MSP) (with the required profile, experience and expertise to successfully deliver all aspects of the project (quality of the partnership) and clarifies an adequate and equitable distribution of the roles and tasks for all involved partners, demonstrating the commitment and active contribution of all participating organisations (incl. coordination and communication between the involved partners)</p> <p>3.4 It is an added value if in the proposal different (Flemish or partner) HE&amp;SIs are involved, either universities, university, universities of applied sciences and arts or both</p>

<p>Potential impact and sustainability</p>	<p><i>The extent to which the project is likely to produce positive long-term effects (impact) and benefits which will be continued after the project duration (sustainability)</i></p>	<p>4.1 The proposal has potential to contribute to applications/policies/services responding to the needs of direct and indirect beneficiaries, with attention for gender, vulnerable people (LNOB) and the environmental impact</p> <p>4.2 The proposal presents a convincing stakeholder management plan to facilitate stakeholder engagement, with attention to gender and vulnerable people (LNOB)</p> <p>4.3 The proposal has a clear uptake strategy with attention to gender and vulnerable people (LNOB), so as to increase significantly the likelihood of knowledge uptake and innovation eventually leading to inclusive and enduring transformations with potential positive socio-political, environmental and economic effects at the level of the ultimate beneficiaries within and beyond the HE&amp;SIs (e.g. local communities, policy makers, local industry, etc.)</p> <p>4.4 The proposal is likely to realize institutional embeddedness (within the partner organization; with relevant local, national, international networks and stakeholders) and foresees organisational capacity strengthening allowing the benefits to continue after the funding (institutional and financial sustainability)</p> <p>4.5. The proposal pays close attention to interlinkages and potential trade-offs between environmental and socio-economic factors and its sustainability strategy ensures a reasonable balance of social, economic and environmental sustainability (INT)</p>
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The VLIR-UOS selection criteria and the general descriptors presented above are the result of a benchmarking study conducted by Syspons (2020) and multiple consultations involving members of selection commissions, staff from similar organisations (e.g. FWO, ARES) and project promoters among others. The benchmarking study revealed that most similar organisations in other countries (e.g. Nuffic, DAAD) work with relatively fewer criteria to assess the quality of academic project proposals. Moreover, the OECD-DAC criteria are not always suitable nor relevant for ex-ante evaluations of academic project proposals leading to persistent confusion about the interpretation of some criteria. Thus, VLIR-UOS is aware that the selection criteria do not simply match on a one-on-one basis with the quality criteria put forward by DGD on the basis of the OECD-DAC evaluation criteria. Nevertheless, the qualitative criteria and their underlying principles are effectively integrated in the VLIR-UOS selection system as showcased in the table below.

		VLIR-UOS selection criteria			
		Relevance and coherence of the project	Quality of the project design	Implementation set-up of the project	Potential impact and sustainability
Qualitative criteria	Relevance	1.1, 1.2, 1.4			
	Coherence	1.1, 1.3, 1.4			
	Effectiveness		2.1, 2.2.,2.3	3.1	
	Efficiency			3.2	
	Expected impact				4.1, 4.2, 4.3
	Sustainability				4.4, 4.5
	Partnership strategy			3.3, 3.4	4.4
	Synergies	1.3			4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4
	Learning	1.3	2.1	3.1	4.3.

With regards to **relevance**, the VLIR-UOS selection system puts forward the *relevance and coherence of the project* selection criterion (C1) to assess the extent to which the proposals respond to beneficiaries’, global, country and partner/institution needs and policies. More precisely, the relevance criterion judges the project’s alignment with the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, national and local policies (descriptor 1.1); the quality and relevance of the presented context and stakeholder analysis with attention to gender, environment and vulnerable people (descriptor 1.2); and the alignment of project objectives with local partners’ priorities and local policies (descriptor 1.4). Further, the selection criterion on relevance and coherence (C1) is given highest priority in the overall assessment compared to the other three selection criteria

With regards to **coherence**, the VLIR-UOS selection system primarily integrates this principle in the selection criterion *relevance and coherence of the project* which focuses on the internal and external coherence of the project proposal by looking at the extent to which the project is compatible with and takes into account potential synergies and complementarities with other initiatives, interventions or actors.

In terms of **internal coherence**, **this** is addressed by looking at the proposal’s fit with the programme ToC (descriptor 1.1), the capitalization on other related (preceding) VLIR-UOS projects in the same context or topic (descriptor 1.3) and the local ownership and alignment with partner’s priorities (descriptor 1.4).

In terms of **external coherence**, these potential synergies and complementarities are to be sought in particular within the thematic JSF framework and in relation to the geographical Joint Strategic Frameworks (JSF), making use of the VLIR-UOS country reference frameworks elaborated per project partner country (descriptor 1.3). The frameworks consist of three components: (1) overview of VLIR-UOS projects in the country; (2) context analysis focused on the SDG framework and higher education sector; (3) overview of Belgian development actors, their local partners and their regional/thematic focus. They will be updated regularly in consultation with the JSFs and especially prior to the launch of competitive calls to be compatible and responsive to evolving/emerging needs and priorities of academic and development actors active in the country/sector. With the members of the JSF HES4SD, VLIR-UOS will facilitate exchanges among academics and other Belgian actors via different means and channels and has the ambition to set-up a communication platform to exchange and interact on opportunities for collaboration.

Regarding the **effectiveness** criterion, the VLIR-UOS selection system integrates this criterion through the formulation of several descriptors. Under the selection criterion *quality of the project*, for instance, VLIR-UOS stresses the importance of the needs to be addressed (as supported by evidence), and the realistic and achievable nature of the project proposal and the need to pay due attention to gender, vulnerable groups and the environment (descriptor 2.1). The selection system further assesses the feasibility and adequacy of the adopted methodology/approach in view of the interconnectedness of sustainable development challenges (descriptor 2.3). Additionally, under the selection criterion *implementation of the project set-up* selection commission members are required to assess the quality of the planning (descriptor 2.1), and risk analysis presented in the project proposal (descriptor 2.1. and 3.1).

The revised VLIR-UOS selection system does no longer specify **efficiency** as a separate selection criterion. Nevertheless, the descriptors of the other selection criteria, particularly those related to the *implementation set-up of the project*, ensure the integration of the principles related to efficiency. Selection commission members assess the extent to which the project budget is deemed justifiable and based on a reasonable relation between the expected results and the anticipated means for implementing them (descriptor 3.2).

With respect to **expected impact**, the revised VLIR-UOS selection system specifies a combined selection criterion *potential impact and sustainability*. Several descriptors focus on impact of projects by assessing the inclusiveness and quality of the project's uptake strategy (descriptors 4.1, 4.2) and stakeholder management plan which are deemed critical in realizing holistic, inclusive and enduring transformations within and beyond the HE&SIs (descriptor 4.3). In their discussion on the impact of new applications, policies and services and the stakeholder engagement strategy, projects are expected to pay due attention to gender balance, implications on vulnerable people (LNOB) and the environment (descriptors 4.1, 4.2).

To assess project proposals with respect to the **sustainability** principle, the VLIR-UOS selection system puts forward descriptors under the selection criterion *potential impact and sustainability*. More precisely, the selection commission judges the institutional embeddedness and foreseen organisational capacity strengthening in view of assessing the institutional and financial sustainability of the proposal (descriptor 4.4). Further, project proposals are assessed on the extent to which the proposals consider interlinkages and potential trade-offs and seeks for a reasonable balance between social, economic and environmental sustainability in its sustainability strategy (descriptor 4.5).

Besides the OECD-DAC criteria discussed above, the VLIR-UOS selection system also pays attention to the **partnership strategy** of the project. More precisely, the selection criterion *implementation set-up of the project* assesses the adequacy in terms of the profile, experience, and expertise of the proposed

partners and the way in which roles and tasks are distributed among them (descriptor 3.3) and encourages interinstitutional collaboration in line with VLIR-UOS strategic priority (descriptor 3.4). In line with VLIR-UOS understanding of balanced partnerships, the selection system also judges the organisational capacity strengthening envisioned by the project (descriptor 4.4).

As for operational **synergies**, proposals are judged on the degree to which the project will seek for synergy, complementarity, interlinkages and consistency with other initiatives implemented in the same context or on the same topic (descriptor 1.3). Additionally, the envisioned relation between academic project promoters/partners and (in)direct beneficiaries through uptake and stakeholder management is assessed via the *potential impact and sustainability* selection criterion (descriptors 4.1, 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4).

Finally, project proposals are assessed on the manner in which they have taken or intend to **take into account recommendations or lessons learned**. In particular, the proposals are assessed on the basis of the quality of their planning, implementation and monitoring of their project through adaptive risk management and suitable results' frameworks (descriptor 2.1, 3.1). Moreover, proposals will be assessed on the way in which they envision to capitalize on related/preceding initiatives (descriptor 1.3).

Further, the VLIR-UOS project formulation guidelines pay great attention to the SDG principles Leave no one behind (LNOB), Interconnectedness (INT) and multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSP), gender and environment and are expected to guide candidate promoters in translating these themes and principles in the project proposal. The consideration of **transversal themes** and **SDG principles** in the project proposals is thus also explicitly put forward in the selection system via various selection criteria and descriptors. Proposals will be assessed on the attention paid to the relation between the project and the environment in the context analysis (descriptor 1.2), the risk analysis and management (descriptors 2.1 and 3.1) and the project's expected impact (descriptor 4.1). Similarly, selection commissions judge proposals based on the extent to which gender and vulnerable people are considered in the context analysis (descriptor 1.2), the risk analysis and management (descriptors 2.1 and 3.1) and the stakeholder analysis, management and engagement strategy (descriptors 1.2, 4.2 and 4.3). Next to the transversal themes, it is important to mention that priority themes of D4D, such as human rights, integrity, decolonisation, D4D and decent work in the context of Higher Education for Sustainable Development, are taken into account via the assessment of the integration of the SDG principles in the project proposals. The risk analysis should also explicitly cover risks related to these priority themes.

### 1.2.3. Scoring and weighing of the criteria

All proposals are assessed by all commission members, thereby guaranteeing equal treatment and triangulation.

As compared with the past (VLIR-UOS selection system 2011-2020) the scoring system was revised, mainly taking into account the appraisal that the scoring system could be optimised by moving further away from the quantitative system which limited qualitative discussion on projects reaching the minimal quality standards, but with very similar scores. The option for this revised scoring system is also inspired by the FWO scoring system and existing systems of scientific project selection within Flemish higher education institutes.

The **scoring** of each of the criteria is done using a qualitative interval scale:

- |   |
|---|
| A: Very good (no revisions are needed)    |
| B: Good (minor revisions might be needed) |

C: Weak (major revisions are needed, hence the proposal cannot be selected. Proposal can be remediated towards a next submission)

D: Very weak

In order to be 'fundable', a proposal should obtain an A or B score on each criterion. Consequently, all fundable proposals can be grouped in 16 (2<sup>4</sup>) categories. These categories are ranked in advance, based on the principle 'the more As the better' and the following prioritisation of the selection criteria (in declining order of priority):

1. Relevance and coherence
2. Quality of the project design
3. Potential impact and sustainability
4. Implementation set-up

Hence, the 16 pre-ranked categories of fundable proposals are by default ranked as follows:

Category	Relevance and coherence	Quality of the project design	Implementation set-up	Potential impact and sustainability
1.	A	A	A	A
2.	A	A	B	A
3.	A	A	A	B
4.	A	B	A	A
5.	B	A	A	A
6.	A	A	B	B
7.	A	B	B	A
8.	A	B	A	B
9.	B	A	B	A
10.	B	A	A	B
11.	B	B	A	A
12.	A	B	B	B
13.	B	A	B	B
14.	B	B	B	A
15.	B	B	A	B
16.	B	B	B	B

This priority of the criteria is the standard default option but can – if needed - be adjusted per call, programme or phase of selection. Such a deviation from the default option will be elaborated in the project call.

The **overall assessment** results from the ranking of the project proposals per pre-ranked category (16). Because even after selection budgets might change, it is important for VLIR-UOS to have a certain number of proposals located around the budget cut-off ranked individually. Based on such a (limited) individual ranking, a limited number of fundable proposals might be taken of the 'selected' list in case of reduced budgets, and in case of increased budgets a limited number of fundable proposals can as such be added to the list of selected proposals. After the validation of the categories during the selection commission meeting, it is determined in which category the budget cut-off is located:

- If all preselected proposals fall within the budget, the lowest categorized 20% of the preselected proposals will be ranked.
- If the budget is insufficient to fund all preselected proposals, all proposals within the category in which the cut-off is located will be ranked.

- If the number of proposals within this category is less than 20% of the total number of proposals to be selected (allowed by the indicative budget available for this call), the proposals from the two adjacent categories are also ranked, and so on, until at least 20% of preselected proposals are ranked.
- This ranking is done on the basis of a qualitative and comparative discussion.
- All new policy priorities (SDG principles, transversal and priority themes, and the specific VLIR-UOS policy priority as to interinstitutional cooperation) have been mainstreamed in the selection criteria and descriptors, allowing the selection commissions to take them into account. This also applies to the extra policy priorities that will be used when proposals are ranked 'ex aequo'. Then the commissions will give priority to (i) a Flemish promoter without previous VLIR-UOS experience, and (ii) to projects from the minority gender group (m/f) or gender-thematic/specific projects.

Hence the final result of the selection meeting is:

- a list of 'fundable' proposals (grouped in potentially 16 pre-ranked categories), of which the lowest scoring 20% is ranked
- a list of non-fundable proposals.

The final, and binding, selection advice is presented to the Bureau UOS which ratifies the binding results of the (regional) selection commissions and relates them to the available budget for the call and the available programme budgets per outcome within the Five-Year Programme (FYP). In the case of SI/TEAM that are assessed by 3 regional commissions, also reserve projects will be ranked, i.e. projects which fell out of the regional commission budget for a specific call but might be considered in case the budget of another regional commission is not fully used. It will be up to the Bureau UOS to decide on the selection of possible reserve projects. Fundable proposals that are not retained will lose this status and can re-submit in a next call for proposals.

#### **1.2.4. Quality assurance as to how to guarantee uniform interpretation and application of criteria and descriptors for projects**

Based on the selection system document and general principles, VLIR-UOS organises training sessions for commission members where the selection criteria and descriptors, and also the scoring system are explained. During the session specific attention goes to the interpretation of criteria and descriptors, the quality of scoring (looking back at previous selection rounds) and feedback, and also the explanation and interpretation of the policy framework. All commission members actively participate in this mandatory training session which has proven to be important to assure quality and exchange and collective learning through best practices. In view of the next project calls such trainings will be organised with a specific focus on the new SDG proof policy framework and the transversal themes (gender and environment) and priority and policy themes, as well as on the adaptations/optimizations introduced in the selection system as of the 2022 programme calls. Selection commission meetings might in future be organised online, on the condition that members have already participated in both a training and a selection meeting before.

### **1.3. General selection criteria for scholarships**

In case of scholarships, the academic criteria are defined by the respective HE&SIs, both for individual and embedded scholarships, whereas the scholarship criteria are based on a common set of VLIR-UOS criteria to which still other criteria can be added by the respective project stakeholders.

For the present criteria, please consult our website: [Scholarships | Vliruos](#).

The selection of embedded scholars in VLIR-UOS projects is considered an academic responsibility (see also section 3 of this document). Embedded scholarships may be granted as part of a project, taking into account the VLIR-UOS Scholarship Guidelines, as mentioned in Article 1 of the project agreements, and which can be found on the [VLIR-UOS website](#). In the case of an IUC partnership or TEAM/Sl project, the general principle is that a scholarship contributes to capacity building at the local partner institution. In the case of IUC partnerships, the partner institution is expected to develop and apply an institutional and transparent scholarships policy. The partner institution is also required to relieve staff members from normal duties – academic and/or administrative – in view of allowing them to devote sufficient time to contribute to the respective IUC project.

A more detailed policy framework for scholarships selection and management will be developed in the course of FYP2.

The role of VLIR-UOS for these types of embedded scholarships is twofold: on the one hand, to **raise awareness** towards the Flemish and local partners responsible for selection on a number of general principles; and on the other hand to collect the necessary **data** for monitoring at portfolio level. Special attention is given to raise awareness on regional gender balance differences between African, Asian and Latin-American scholars, especially to encourage applications from African female scholars who are lacking behind in the statistics.

The following principles serve as guidelines for embedded scholarship attribution within projects.

#### **Change agent potential**

- Applicants are staff members of a partner institution. This is especially required for PhD candidates in the framework of IUC partnerships.
- Preference is given to candidates that can demonstrate a higher possibility of contributing to impact after the project. Especially for IUC partnerships, PhD candidates are expected to contribute to institutional capacity building after completing the PhD or either contribute to society in a relevant public, private or civil society organization.
- Preference is given to candidates whose motivation and professional goals highlight sustainable development relevant themes and picture roles as a change agent.

#### **Overall diversity policy aspects**

- 40-60% general balance for scholarship attribution to men and women. These figures can change depending on local situations based on the respective local gender balance.
- Data is available for tracking the numbers of scholarships disaggregated by gender (and other diversity/LNOB characteristics to be specified later).
- Aim at diversification of candidates (In case of two equally qualified candidates, preference is given to candidates of religious, racial, ethnic, social disadvantaged groups within a country )

#### **Specific measures, criteria, strategies**

- A proactive outreach and recruitment system is developed to inform students and staff about scholarship opportunities (especially to encourage female candidates to apply).

- Systems to support individuals to enter studies or gain entry into (pre-doctoral) training are developed.
- For PhD scholarships: the candidate has not obtained a PhD degree before.
- For master scholarships: it is preferred that the candidate has not obtained a master degree before.
- Preference will be given to candidates who have never received a scholarship from the Belgian government or a scholarship to study in a higher income country.

## 2. Selection and assessment commissions for projects

### 2.1. Organising principle for the selection commissions for projects

The selection commissions are organised as along the lines of the earlier mentioned FYP2 outcomes, however, selection will always take place per VLIR-UOS programme (IUC, SI, TEAM, ICP, ITP ...) and considering the high numbers of proposals usually to be expected for SI and TEAM project calls, with a strong focus on thematic sustainable development challenges in relation with country level contextualisation, selection is organised via Regional Selection Commissions. In other commissions, regional/country expertise will be guaranteed through the mixture in profile and background of the selection commission members.

There will be at least 6 VLIR-UOS commissions:

- Outcome SI/TEAM:
  - Regional selection commission Africa for the selection of SI/TEAM proposals in Africa<sup>1</sup>;
  - Regional selection commission Asia for the selection of SI/TEAM proposals in Asia;
  - Regional selection commission Latin America for the selection of SI/TEAM proposals in Latin America;
- Outcome IUC : Selection / Assessment commission IUC
- Outcome ESN: Selection / Assessment commission ICP Connect / ITP
- Outcome GM : Assessment commission GM
- Outcome BSS: the selection system still has to be developed.

More details per programme, under section 4 of this document.

### 2.2. Composition and size of the selection / assessment commissions

According to the Syspons study, the composition of the VLIR-UOS selection commissions with an exclusive focus on external experts is one of the main strengths of its selection system. Therefore Syspons recommends that this focus should be maintained as it assures an independent and equal assessment of all proposals. *“The mix of profiles with regards to the professional background of selection commission members should also be maintained. Through the readjustment of the peer review system, specific (scientific) knowledge not represented within a determinate commission but needed to successfully assess a proposal can be included to inform the selection process.”* Other new elements brought into the commission, is the fact that the commission as a whole should contain expertise on the SDG principles

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<sup>1</sup> List of VLIR-UOS partner countries 2022-2026:

**Africa:** Benin, Burundi, DR Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Morocco, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda

**Asia:** Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam

**Latin America:** Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Peru

*and also in implementation of the VLIR-UOS gender policy, the gender balance in the commission was revised. Finally, taking into account recommendations from the evaluation on 'creating the conditions for uptake' and the need to strengthen the 'science society interface' also this expertise should be present in the commission.*

The VLIR-UOS commissions are composed of **international experts**, with no affiliation whatsoever to a Flemish HEI, in order to guarantee impartiality and integrity. They consist of four to five effective members. In addition, substitute members are selected in case an effective member cannot participate due to force majeure or conflict of interest. VLIR-UOS attaches great importance to participation of commission members from partner countries within the selection commissions.

**Requirements** for each individual selection commission member:

- Affiliation: a selection commission member cannot be staff of a Belgian HEI or research institute.
- Each selection commission member should have the following competences:
  - o an international academic background with interest in the broader development challenges or a development co-operation background;
  - o (basic) knowledge of the Agenda 2030, SDGs and the 3 principles ('Leave no one behind', 'Multistakeholder partnerships' and 'interconnectedness'). More in-depth knowledge is an advantage;
  - o experience with interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and/or transdisciplinary approaches;
  - o in the case of regional commissions, each member should have specific expertise on the region, preferably with a focus on VLIR-UOS partner countries in that region;
  - o very good command of English, as all proposals to be assessed are elaborated in English, and all selection meetings will be in English.

Each commission has to contain a mix of profiles, professional and cultural, regional backgrounds and expertise, and should include:

- international academic and development cooperation expertise;
- in depth knowledge about the 3 SDG principles, including gender and diversity for the 'leave no one behind' principle and stakeholder management and multi actor partnerships;
- methodological/technical expertise (OECD-DAC criteria, Theory of Change, intervention modalities,...);
- expertise on 'creating the conditions for uptake' and 'science society interface';
- expertise in higher education policy, scientific research policy and practice. At least 50% of the commission members should have expertise in higher education policy, scientific research policy and practice;
- experience with interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and/or transdisciplinary approaches;
- knowledge of the Flemish higher education system;
- a gender balance, minimally 25-75% and preferably 50-50%.
- a balance as to experts from partner countries and Western countries

The **mandate** of commission members will be limited in time in order to guarantee sufficient dynamism, but long enough to also allow stability and continuity. Each new member will be trained and coached by VLIR-UOS.

**DGD representatives** will continue to be invited to participate in the selection / assessment meetings and have an advising/observer role. They can provide country specific expertise that can feed into the discussions concerning the assessment of the sustainable development relevance of the academic project proposals, and/or the link to Enabel projects.

Each meeting of every commission (not the GM Assessment Commission) is **chaired** and moderated by a member of the Bureau UOS. The chair does not have access to the individual project proposals, only to the annotated agenda. His / her role is to chair the meeting, keep the time, and make sure the rules and procedures of VLIR-UOS in place for the specific call and selection are correctly applied by the commission. Moreover, the chair has to ensure that the major divergences in scores (identified by VLIR-UOS and provided to the chair prior to the meeting) are addressed during the discussion phase. The chair does not give any personal evaluation and is neutral. The chair can report to the other members of the Bureau UOS on the overall conduct of the meeting during the Bureau UOS meeting when the selection results will be validated.

Each commission has a secretary (a VLIR-UOS programme manager) to take note and to update the scoring table. Other VLIR-UOS staff members will participate in the entire meeting to oversee the selection and to assist the chair. The VLIR-UOS staff members participate in the meeting and have an informative role, e.g. to explain the track record (if needed) or to give oral feedback on the performed budget check.

### **2.3. Deontological code of conduct**

The commission members are invited to sign a code of conduct, in which the criteria of eligibility and general rules of conduct will be stated.

The members of the selection commissions are not appointed to a Belgian university or universities of applied sciences and arts, research institute or any other higher education institution. Combining membership of a selection commission and executing external evaluation assignments for VLIR-UOS, and having another responsibility for VLIR-UOS-projects/programmes, is not possible either.<sup>2</sup>

The commission members function in their individual capacity. They do not represent institutions. Every member gives an objective assessment on the basis of the selection criteria, and only on the basis of the information that was provided by VLIR-UOS. No contact can be taken with the applicants, or with related parties.

Commission members will be asked to abstain from evaluating proposals in the following cases:

- A commission member with a professional appointment to a foreign institute where the applicant(s) has been enrolled as a student or professional after January 1st of the year n-3 (n=year of application);
- A commission member is co-author with the applicant(s) of a publication that was submitted or published after January 1st of the year n-3 (n=year of application);

'Co-authorship' is to be understood as follows:

- Co-authorship of a monograph of which the applicant is co-author as well;

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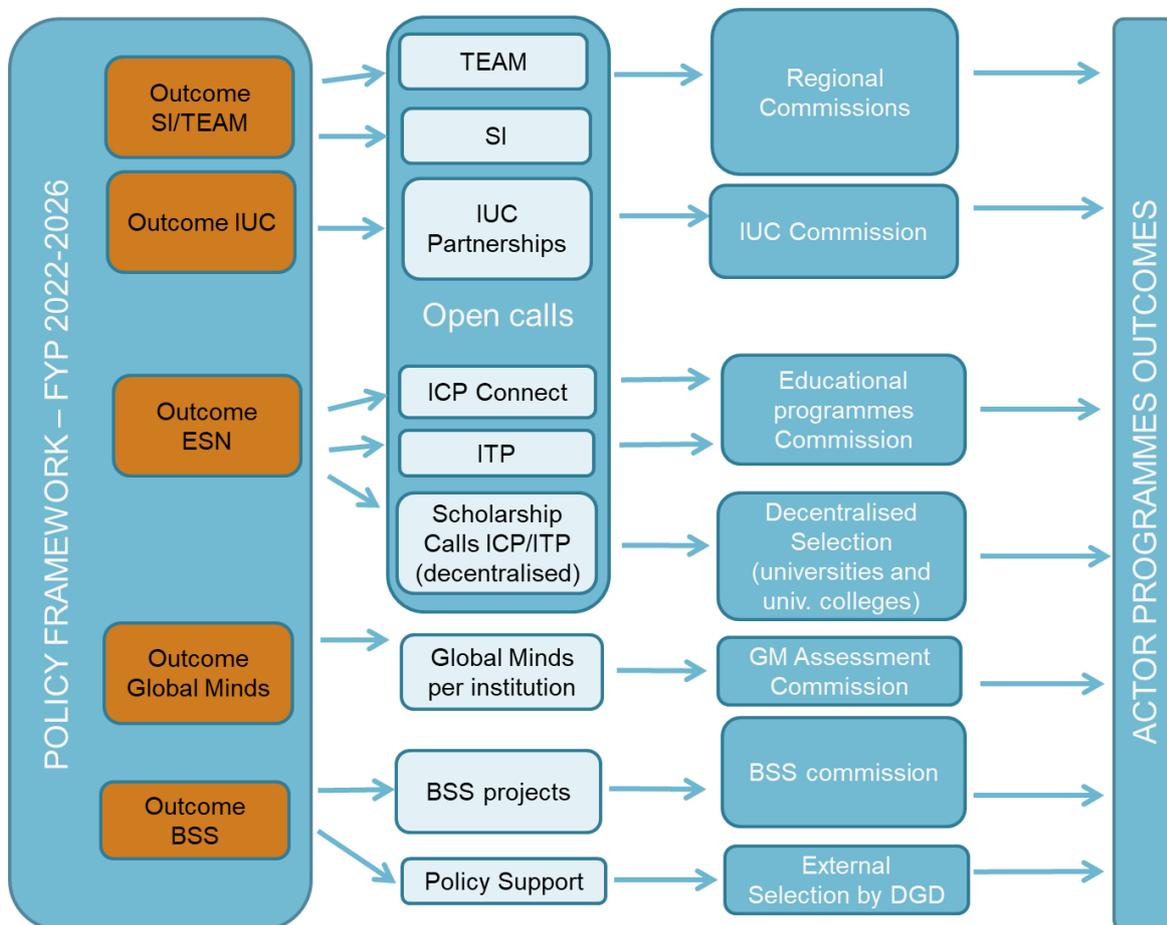
<sup>2</sup> This only applies for the commission member in question, not for the entire staff of the institution / organization the commission member is part of.

- Co-authorship of an article or another type of contribution to a collection (book, journal issue, report, congress proceedings, abstract ...) of which the applicant is co-author as well;
- Editors are not regarded as co-authors insofar as they have not also acted as what is understood under 'co-author' as described above. Co-editors of the applicant are not accepted as an external referee.
- A commission member is partner of the applicant(s) in a research project that has been applied for or has been running after January 1st of the year n-3 (n=year of application).

If one of the above situations occurs the commission member will be replaced by a reserve member.

## 2.4. Flow chart FYP2 selection / assessment commissions

The flow chart below provides an overview of the type of programme calls (middle) that will be launched during FYP 2022-2026 outcome and by which selection/assessment commission projects will be selected (right) to feed back into the actor programme outcomes.



*Note : decentralized selections of embedded scholarships and at the level of GM, are not visualized since this chart focuses on the central selection system.*

### 3. Selection procedure and specificities per programme

The aim here is to present a general overview of the selection system for each individual programme.

For each call and selection procedure a number of standard procedural steps are included. However, per programme specificities apply such as the number of stages foreseen in the call and selection procedure. Overall principle is that the small projects, e.g. SI, should be easy access with a “light” selection procedure, whereas selection becomes more severe and multi-stage the bigger the project budget, due to risk assessment.

In this document only the specificities for ICP Connect project selection procedures were included.

Procedural steps	Details
Call	Open Call  Restricted call (e.g; limited set of countries, limitation in terms of applicants and policy priorities, call for phase 2 projects in case of IUC or ICP Connect)
Stages in procedure	One or multi-stage
Application modalities	Application via the Flemish university (association) based on promoters at Flemish and partner institution level  Application via candidate partner institution (e.g. IUC)  Institutional application (e.g. Global Minds)
Eligibility Check & notification / Eligibility criteria	First check ICOS, metacheck VLIR-UOS secretariat, and decision by the Bureau UOS  Eligibility criteria: differentiated per programme
Selection criteria	General selection criteria (4) but differentiation in the descriptors of the selection criteria  In combination with possible changing policy priorities
Peer review	External peer review assessing academic quality as part of the application of selection criteria, or not

Institutional assessment	External institutional assessment, as part of the application of selection criteria, or not
Selection body	Selection commission / Assessment commission

### 3.1. ICP Connect

Procedural steps	Details
Call	<p>Call procedure differs depending on the status:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Call for next Stage ICP Connect 2022 : call restricted to 15 ongoing ICP incremental funding projects</li> <li>- New Intake in 2024 : Open Call</li> </ul>
Stages in procedure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Call for next Stage ICP Connect 2022 : Two-stage procedure (1/ Call &amp; Selection of concept notes; 2/ Call &amp; assessment of Fully fledged proposals ICP Connect )</li> <li>- New Intake in 2024 : procedure still to be defined on the basis of discussions on ICP Connect 2.0 (opening up ICP Connect to bachelor and postgraduate programmes)</li> </ul>
Application modalities	Application per selection stage via the Flemish university association; Flemish university association ICOS submits proposals from universities (and for future calls also Universities of Applied Sciences and Arts within their university association) to VLIR-UOS
Eligibility Check & notification	<p>Per selection stage the standard eligibility criteria apply: Eligibility of applicants; Eligibility of budget and implementation period; Eligibility of countries; Eligibility of submission modalities. First check by the ICOS and final check by VLIR-UOS secretariat, and decision by the Bureau UOS</p> <p>In terms of eligibility of applicants the following applies: 'ZAP' member with tenure at a Flemish university or with an equivalent position; or professor/lecturer with tenure at a Flemish university college; or non-academic staff (ATP) of the Flemish higher education institute, as long as there is a backing from the institute that the project</p>

	promoter is allowed to act as a promoter. Emeriti cannot apply. In terms of local promoters similar criteria apply, but this is to be aligned with the institutional policy at level of the partner institution.
Selection/assessment criteria	General Selection criteria (4) with specific descriptors related to the specificity of ICP Connect, see below
Peer review	Not applicable
Selection body	Per selection stage, selection is performed by the Educational Programmes (ICP Connect / ITP) Commission

### 3.2. Assessment criteria ICP Connect Stage 2

Per VLIR-UOS programme the descriptors for each selection criterion were adjusted in line with its conceptual framework and specificity. The specificity of ICP Connect lays on consolidation and making the network more sustainable. The descriptors provide an objective interpretation of the criteria, for the ICP Connect selection commission<sup>3</sup>. The descriptors have been adapted to suit the specific characteristics of the ICP Connect programme.

Criteria	Definition	Descriptors
<b>Relevance and coherence of the project</b>	<i>The extent to which the proposal responds to beneficiaries', global, country, and partner/institution needs, policies (relevance) and fits with the programme Theory of Change (ToC) and within the institution/context (coherence)</i>	<p><i>The proposal aligns with the Agenda 2030 and the ICP Connect programme ToC.</i></p> <p><i>The proposal is based on a genuine and evidence-based context and stakeholder analysis with attention to gender, vulnerable people (LNOB) and the environment.</i></p> <p><i>The proposal is compatible/links up with or capitalizes on other relevant initiatives within the context of HE4SD and seeks for synergies and/or complementarities (INT &amp; MSP).</i></p> <p><i>The proposal demonstrates ownership of the involved local partners in the ICP Connect network, and is in line with the local partners' priorities.</i></p> <p><i>The proposal contributes to improving the relevance of an accredited master programme, in line with the needs of the direct and indirect beneficiaries (students, partner organisations, alumni, public/private/civil actors), especially vulnerable groups (LNOB).</i></p>

<sup>3</sup> Based on the ERC (European Research Council) and OECD-DAC (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development - Development Assistance Committee) definitions.

		<i>The proposal demonstrates a marked ability to attract a diverse and international student population.</i>
<b>Quality of the project design</b>	<i>The extent to which a proposal presents a convincing project strategy</i>	<p><i>The proposal presents a realistic and applicable Theory of Change (ToC) narrative, outlining the change desired, the needs to be addressed, the intended pathways toward change, and makes underlying assumptions or preconditions explicit (e.g. risk analysis)</i></p> <p><i>Linked to the ToC narrative, the proposal articulates a convincing project logic with a clear and realistic flow between a long-term sustainable development objective (overall goal/impact level) the outcomes expected from the project, and the envisaged intermediate changes (=results) by formulating activities/identifying deliverables linked to one or more of the six standard VLIR-UOS project domains .</i></p> <p><i>The proposal is original, creative, innovative (scientific, academic or pedagogical excellence) in:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>(i) sustaining the introduced global focus and networking component in an existing master programme</i></li> <li><i>(ii) facilitating the employability and (re)insertion of graduates and their effective acting as agents of change</i></li> <li><i>(iii) sustaining the capacity built within the partner universities at the level of both the local educational programmes and local staff, and in sustaining the global network.</i></li> </ul> <p><i>The proposal elaborates an appropriate and feasible (scientific, academic or pedagogical) methodology or approach which recognizes/addresses the interconnectedness of the sustainable development challenges (e.g. multidisciplinary or systems approaches) (INT).</i></p>
<b>Implementation set-up of the project</b>	<i>The extent to which the proposal presents a strong plan and partnership for the execution of the project</i>	<p><i>The project ToC is translated into a clear planning (which will facilitate effective project execution, follow-up and monitoring through a convincing set of indicators) and adequate measures to deal in an adaptive way with the most important uncertainties (assumptions/risks), with attention to gender, vulnerable groups and environment.</i></p> <p><i>The proposal is cost-effective, the budget is reasonable and justified.</i></p> <p><i>The proposal involves an appropriate mix of partners (persons and their organisations) (MSP) (with the re-quired profile, experience and expertise to success-fully deliver all aspects of the project (quality of the partnership) and clarifies an adequate and equitable distribution of the roles and tasks for all involved partners, demonstrating the commitment and active contribution of all participating organisations (incl. coordination and communication between the involved partners).</i></p>

		<p><i>It is an added value if in the proposal different (Flemish or partner) HE&amp;SIs are involved, either universities, universities of applied sciences and arts or both, especially if this cooperation enables pooling of expertise and/or cost-effectiveness.</i></p>
<p><b>Potential impact and sustainability</b></p>	<p><i>The extent to which the project is likely to produce positive long-term effects (impact) and benefits which will be continued after the project duration (sustainability)</i></p>	<p><i>The proposal has potential to contribute to applications/policies/services responding to the needs of direct and indirect beneficiaries, with attention for gender, vulnerable people (LNOB) and the environmental impact</i></p> <p><i>The proposal presents a convincing stakeholder management plan to facilitate stakeholder engagement, with attention to gender and vulnerable people (LNOB)</i></p> <p><i>The proposal has a clear uptake strategy with attention to gender and vulnerable people (LNOB) so as to increase the likelihood of knowledge uptake and innovation within all involved HE&amp;SIs.</i></p> <p><i>The proposal is likely to enable the master programme to be firmly embedded in the university/ies involved, with meaningful ownership of and commitment by all participating institutions, allowing capacity to be built among all HE&amp;SIs involved at the level of both academic content and pedagogics, and individuals, institutions and networks. The proposal is likely to enable the partnership to evolve into a network and the network activities to continue after the VLIR-UOS funding has come to an end. The partners are challenged to develop and implement a sustainability strategy which may lead to shifting roles and responsibilities among partners in the course of phase 2.</i></p> <p><i>A convincing after-graduation policy, including measures on how to support graduates to be active global citizens / agents of change and follow-up on them, is in place.</i></p>

Also qualitative criteria and their underlying principles are integrated in the VLIR-UOS selection system: relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, expected impact, sustainability, partnership strategy, synergies and learning

For phase 2 the ICP Connect proposals will be assessed, by the same committee, on the basis of the four new VLIR-UOS criteria, aligned with the conceptual framework for ICP Connect.

This assessment is aimed at optimizing the proposals, as the funding guarantee has already been given. Since this is not a selection but an assessment procedure, the focus lays on giving recommendations.