

BACHELOR OF SCIENCE IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT BRUSSEL – UNIVERSITEIT GENT

CONDUCT-TAILORED ACCREDITATION • ASSESSMENT REPORT

31 May 2021





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1 Executive summary

The Bachelor of Science in Social Sciences (BScSS) is a joint project of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) and Ghent University (UGent). The VUB is the coordinating institution of the BScSS, an academic bachelor programme of 180 ECTS taught in English. The three-year full-time programme started in September 2016. In the current academic year 2020-2021, a fifth cohort has started; students from the first two cohorts have graduated in the meantime.

The BScSS takes up a unique position in the Belgian / Flemish higher education landscape of social sciences. It clearly fills a niche and does so to the extent that from a quantitative point of view, the programme is almost becoming a victim of its own success.

The domain specific learning outcomes are adequate in stipulating the domain, level and orientation of the programme. The newly formulated programme specific learning outcomes are aligned to the domain specific outcomes and represent very well what this programme is all about. The panel thinks highly of the intellectual ambition of the programme: the interdisciplinary curriculum, the transdisciplinary nature, the critical and problem-centred approach, the attention to research methodology, etc. The teaching philosophy is not only particularly suited for this type of programme but also constitutes an important feature and strength of the programme. The diversity – both in terms of incoming students and course contents – constitutes an additional dimension of the programme that according to the panel is worth cherishing and developing.

The panel has encountered a very enthusiastic and energetic BScSS team displaying a genuine 'esprit de corps'. Notwithstanding their individual departmental and institutional belonging and the growing ratio between students and staff, the team members are providing students a first-class education experience. Moreover, the disciplinary and didactic quality of the course instructors and teaching assistants, as well as their personal commitment to the programme and its students are excellent.

BScSS students are allowed to issue criticism and feel safe to do so. The panel appreciates that students are entitled to assess and reflect on the performance of the programme and the teachers. Students and alumni can address their individual and group concerns with the staff and are heard by the management. They are also positive about the programme's quality of information and level of communication. In this regard, the BScSS programme is definitely living up to the expectations it generated prior to enrolment.

In general students are satisfied with the services and facilities at both VUB and UGent. They appreciate the availability of the instructors and assistants, as well as the efforts of the administrative support staff. Nonetheless, staff and students indicated that due to COVID-19, there were considerable waiting lists for specialised services in English such as a student psychologist.

Programme assessment is built around the principle of alignment between programme learning outcomes, learning goals and contents of individual courses, and the respective assessment formats. The panel considers that the day-to-day assessment reality of the BScSS programme reflects this alignment, as well as the evaluation principles of reliability, validity and transparency.

In its review of a sample of bachelor papers, the panel found that the end level products meet the programme expectations in terms of individual and interdisciplinary research projects. The panel was impressed by the breadth of the subjects which were relevant, challenging and often reflected the personal context of the student. Panel members agreed to the scores given by the assessors and appreciate the insightful feedback students receive on the assessed paper. Bachelor papers with a mere pass score were definitely up to par with what can be expected of a final product at academic bachelor level, while papers with a high score

could stand the test of a master thesis. Hence, it is fair to state that students who successfully complete the bachelor paper have reached the BScSS programme-specific learning outcomes.

The vast majority of BScSS graduates move on to a master programme with several students signing up for a programme with a distinctly interdisciplinary character. This finding does not come as a surprise but confirms the panel's impression that the BScSS is a high quality programme in design, delivery and outcome.

Amidst all positive findings the panel considers that there is one element that may jeopardise a continued high quality programme implementation in the future. The success of the BScSS programme in terms of student numbers threatens the delivery of the programme along the lines of the current teaching philosophy. While the benefits of inter-university cooperation clearly outweigh the disadvantages, the institutional setting does seem to hamper the allocation of sufficient staff to uphold this philosophy with growing student numbers.

The panel assessing the quality of the Bachelor of Science in Social Sciences offered by VUB and UGent, judges the overall quality of the programme to be good. In view of this holistic judgement, the panel issues a positive advice to NVAO. This appreciation is motivated through the findings and considerations the panel has formulated based on its impressions from the self-evaluation report, the discussions with programme stakeholders and the review of a sample of bachelor papers.

In view of the further development of the BScSS programme, the panel formulates the following recommendations. This advice does not affect the positive judgement on the quality of the programme. The panel recommends the institutional top management to allocate sufficient additional human and material resources to the programme. Moreover, it advises the programme management to look into the opportunities of co-teaching, to investigate why students leave the programme and take steps to prevent unnecessary drop-out, to elaborate the transdisciplinary dimension of social sciences in the curriculum, and to provide more English language training.

The Hague, 31 May 2021

On behalf of the expert panel convened to assess the Bachelor of Science in Social Sciences

Marc Vermeulen
(chair)

Mark Delmartino
(secretary)

2 Findings and Considerations of the panel

The Bachelor of Science in Social Sciences (BScSS) is a joint project of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) and Ghent University (UGent). The VUB is the coordinating institution of the BScSS, an academic bachelor programme of 180 ECTS taught in English. The three-year full-time programme started in September 2018. In the current academic year 2020-2021, a fifth cohort has started; students from the first two cohorts have graduated in the meantime.

In view of this accreditation visit, the programme has produced a well-written Self Evaluation Report (SER) that provides comprehensive and useful information on the first five years of the programme and on its plans for the near future. Reporting on its findings and considerations, the panel follows the order of topics in the SER: programme aims, how the programme is realising these aims, and how the realisation of the teaching aims is verified. The panel found that key components of the programme – purpose, learning outcomes, curriculum, enrolment, staff, student guidance, assessment, graduates' exit qualifications – are covered in good detail in the report. The SER also points to a number of challenges the programme is facing and which have been discussed during the online site visit. The panel noticed from both the materials and the discussions that the programme representatives show a strong sense of self-reflection. Furthermore, the interviewees have demonstrated during the discussions that the daily reality of the programme coincides with the presentation in the SER.

Programme aims

Purpose

The panel understood from the materials and the discussions that in so far as the programme's purpose is concerned, the BScSS was originally developed to meet a double need: on the one hand, international scientific and professional agencies advocated for a social sciences oriented bachelor programme providing students with the interdisciplinary skills and insights required for careers in international environments; on the other hand, there was a large group of English-speaking students graduating from European secondary schools in Brussels who could be interested to continue their university studies in Belgium if good quality English language programmes were available. The development of this inter- and transdisciplinary bachelor programme focusing on three social sciences disciplines (political science, sociology, communication sciences) and paying particular attention to critical thinking and research methodology proved to be an enormous success. Currently, almost 700 students are enrolled in the BScSS: their backgrounds are highly diverse and go way beyond the initially targeted population to include students from regular Belgian secondary schools, from across Europe and the rest of the world. According to the panel, the BScSS currently takes up a unique position in the Belgian / Flemish higher education landscape of social sciences. It clearly fills a niche and does so to the extent that from a quantitative point of view, it is almost becoming victim of its own success.

Learning outcomes

At the start of the programme in September 2016, the domain specific learning outcomes of the programme were defined according to the standards stipulated in the European Qualifications Framework and the Flemish Qualification Framework, reflecting the curricular specificity that distinguishes a bachelor programme in social sciences from bachelor programmes in the respective disciplinary domains. In the meantime, the programme has developed programme-specific learning outcomes: the panel noticed that the new learning outcomes (which are listed in Annex 2 to this report) are an operationalisation of the domain specific learning outcomes, differentiate learning outcomes according to knowledge and competences, and reflect adequately the features of the current BScSS programme. The panel understood from the materials and the discussions that the programme-specific learning outcomes are relatively new (2020) and constitute the result of a benchmarking exercise that was undertaken after the first three years of programme implementation and in view of the current accreditation visit. This exercise has resulted in an update of the programme's core features and its learning outcomes. The panel has studied both 'old' (domain-specific) and

‘new’ (programme-specific) learning outcomes. It acknowledges that the programme-specific learning outcomes better reflect the current ambition of the programme, the expertise of the teaching staff representing seven departments in two universities, and responds adequately to the comments from the previous panel at the time of the initial accreditation. The intended learning outcomes are common to all BScSS students, irrespective of the track / discipline they choose in the third year. Further to the panel’s questions, the programme management confirmed that irrespective of their BScSS track, graduates can pursue a master programme in any of the three disciplines at VUB and UGent. The panel considers that the domain specific learning outcomes are adequate in stipulating the domain, level and orientation of the programme. The newly formulated programme specific learning outcomes are aligned to these old learning outcomes and represent very well what this BScSS programme is all about.

Programme features

At the time of the site visit, in spring 2021, the six core features of the BScSS programme are: (i) a problem-centred curriculum focusing on current issues and requiring an active and critical engagement from students; (ii) a multidisciplinary outset integrating theoretical and methodological courses from the three disciplines across the entire curriculum; (iii) an inter- and transdisciplinary dimension confronting students with different disciplines in one course and encouraging students to approach social reality from different angles; (iv) a critical approach to social, political and communication theories focusing on socially relevant themes, as well as on feminist, post-colonial and radical democratic theories; (v) a strong emphasis on qualitative and quantitative research methods; and (vi) an orientation on the contemporary global world with Europe and its institutions as a jumping board for studying processes and changes that occur across the globe. The panel gathered from the materials and discussions that compared to the first years of BScSS, the programme now centre-stages the problem-driven focus, focuses more on contemporary challenges across the globe (rather than merely Europe) and emphasises critical (and not only analytical) thinking in various traditions of scientific thought. The panel thinks highly of the intellectual ambition of the programme: the interdisciplinary curriculum, its transdisciplinary nature, the critical and problem-centred approach, the attention to research methodology, etc. Moreover, the panel appreciates the efforts of the programme to engage in a broad benchmarking exercise involving also students and alumni. Finally, the panel considers that the diversity in the programme – both in terms of incoming students and course contents – constitutes an additional dimension of the programme that is worth cherishing and developing.

Inter-university cooperation

The BScSS is an inter-university bachelor programme in which VUB and UGent offer an equivalent number of courses. The coordination is in the hands of VUB and most of the teaching takes place in Brussels. The panel found that the cooperation between the two institutions is fine, that the respective programme coordinators, professors and teaching assistants get along very well, and that the accumulation of (research) expertise is a distinct value added for the purpose of the programme and for the (quality of education offered to) students. While the benefits of cooperation clearly outweigh the disadvantages, the panel understands that the institutional setting - with the BScSS programme being organised by seven different academic departments across two faculties at two different universities – poses a number of practical challenges in the organisation of the programme to the various stakeholders (management, professors, assistants, educational service staff and students). These challenges are all the more prominent given the enormous success (student numbers) of the programme. According to the panel, the programme’s performance both in quantity and in quality (as will also be elaborated on in the rest of the report) should constitute a lever for the programme management to ask the respective university hierarchies for more human and material resources at both institutions.

How is the programme realising these aims?

Curriculum

The BScSS has a curriculum of 180 ECTS. The study load is evenly divided over three years / six semesters. The first two years are common to all students, who choose a disciplinary track – political sciences, sociology or communication sciences – in year three. The programme is built around four complementary learning streams: (i) the foundational disciplines; (ii) inter- and transdisciplinarity; (iii) research skills; and (iv) critical thinking. The structure of the curriculum and the respective learning streams have been described in good detail in the SER. The panel gathered from the materials and the discussions that students are gradually introduced in the inter- and transdisciplinary dimensions of the programme and acquire research and critical thinking skills throughout the entire curriculum. According to the panel, this approach provides students with a good foundation for consolidating their academic skills and developing critical thinking.

The discussions revealed that the programme coordinators and the academic staff are fully aware that social sciences comprise more than ‘just’ three disciplinary foundations and that also other domains such as law, philosophy, history, economics, etc. are taken on board in the transdisciplinary curriculum. This is particularly the case when students are confronted with feminist or post-colonial theories or study issues related to e.g. demography. Similarly, the panel obtained good and reassuring clarifications on the contents of some of the courses. For instance, the panel was satisfied to hear what is covered in the Critical Thinking courses as it initially had some doubts on the title of these courses given that critical thinking is a hallmark of the entire programme and takes up central stage in the four learning streams. The discussions with teaching assistants, professors and students/alumni moreover emphasised that the education provided is research-informed, with professors using examples from their own research in class, and teaching assistants supervising bachelor papers that are in the domain of their own PhD research. In so far as the curriculum contents are concerned, the panel suggests including more input from external professionals in the courses. Moreover, while the interdisciplinary component seems well covered, there is room according to the panel for elaborating on the transdisciplinary dimension of social sciences.

The BScSS programme encourages students to participate in international exchange programmes. According to the SER, students mainly do so in the fifth semester, i.e. at the time when they start the track-specific programme. Further to the panel’s question, the programme management indicated that students who wish to spend a study period abroad are supported by three teaching assistants who coordinate the Erasmus exchanges. These staff check and approve the individual study programmes and monitor the performance of the students abroad. The panel appreciates that students are offered the opportunity to study abroad and can do so without incurring study delay whilst maintaining their opportunities to enter a relevant (disciplinary) master programme afterwards.

According to the SER, the bachelor paper is the culmination of the BScSS programme: it is a research-based learning project of 12 ECTS, which is organised throughout the third year and results in an individual paper of an interdisciplinary nature. Although guided by their supervisors throughout the full research process, students should develop and demonstrate an ability for independent study and inquiry. On request of the panel, the programme put at disposition a representative sample (in terms of quality) of bachelor papers and their evaluation forms. While the quality of the papers and their assessment will be addressed in the next section, the panel found that overall the papers lived up to the programme expectations in terms of individual and interdisciplinary research projects. The panel was impressed by the breadth of the subjects which were relevant, challenging and often very interesting. In several cases students had used their own country expertise as the context in which to investigate a particular problem or theory. The panel gathered from the discussions that this also happens in smaller course assignments and that students are encouraged to use (and test the veracity of) sources that are only available in the local language. The panel found that in some cases the level of academic English was rather limited for a three-year English language programme and that - contrary to the interdisciplinary approach - the

transdisciplinary character was sometime less visible. In view of its finding on the use of academic English, the panel suggests the programme to provide more language training for academic and research contexts. After all, the expected language level (B2) is quite basic for an academic programme that is offered entirely in this language.

Teaching philosophy

The panel established that there is clear alignment between the above-mentioned features of the programme, the curriculum structure and the principles of the programme's teaching philosophy. The panel gathered from the many examples provided by students, alumni, teaching assistants, professors and coordinators that the principles described in the SER are indeed upheld throughout the programme: by including multiple disciplinary perspectives, students are more aware of their own position towards diverse fields of knowledge; through the problem-centred approach of the programme students are provided tools and conceptual frameworks to confront dissonant information on societal problems; students not only acquire academic writing, debating and presenting skills but are also taught to pass on the fruits of their research to a non-academic audience; right from the start students are made to take charge of their own learning processes through independent study assignments; the programme's progressive learning curve notably in methodology courses helps students to become master of their own education; notwithstanding the high number of students, the programme promotes open exchange between students and teaching staff, facilitating teaching staff's accessibility to students; the diversity of the student population representing more than 70 nationalities is used to the benefit of the programme with students functioning as country experts in fruitful interaction with the teaching staff; finally, the intercultural skills of students are enhanced when they are allocated to smaller teams, which are selected by teaching staff so to maximize national, ethnic and gender diversity. The panel considers that the teaching philosophy is not only particularly suited for this type of programme but that it also constitutes an important feature and strength of the programme. Designing and delivering the programme in this way makes it interesting for teaching staff to be involved in it; while BScSS students and alumni acknowledge and appreciate the importance of such teaching philosophy, considering it a very attractive feature of the programme. In this regard, the panel gathered good evidence during the discussions that the programme is indeed making optimum use of the diversity in class. Moreover, the diversity of the student body is taken into account in the teaching and learning environment, even though the programme and university structures are, on the whole, still dominantly white, male and Belgian.

Staff

The programme is a joint realisation of seven research departments at two universities. The workload is evenly distributed across universities: both universities are in charge of 22 courses of 6 ECTS each, with VUB additionally overseeing the bachelor paper. A total of 33 instructors, professors or post-doctoral researchers with a limited teaching responsibility, are responsible for the courses. The panel understood that involving this number of professors does not only enhance the commitment of the respective universities, faculties and research departments but also ensures that the BScSS programme is not an isolated programme at both universities and benefits from innovations that are introduced in other programmes. The number of teaching assistants, however, varies considerably with VUB allocating nine teaching assistants (three per discipline) and UGent only three. The programme managed to obtain additional funding from VUB in view of the higher than anticipated number of students enrolled. The discussion with programme management revealed that the number of teaching staff allocated to the BScSS programme is an issue. The big number of students has already forced the programme to adopt alternative teaching formats, reduce the number of assignments and rethink the original approach to the bachelor paper. The panel understands that if the number of students keeps growing, it will be impossible for the programme team to maintain similar standards and approaches of teaching and assessment with the same number of course instructors and teaching assistants. As thesis supervision is an important but time-consuming endeavour, it is likely that a further growth in student numbers will affect the organisation of the bachelor paper 'course'. In this regard, the panel welcomes the enormous progress the programme has made in terms of blended learning during the COVID-

19 pandemic and encourages the team to continue using the most relevant techniques and approaches for blended learning once the situation is 'back to normal'. Moreover, the panel suggests the programme to investigate the opportunities of co-teaching courses.

The information materials and the discussions with students and alumni have convinced the panel that the disciplinary and didactic quality of the teaching staff – instructors and assistants alike – as well as their personal commitment to the programme and its students are excellent. If anything, students and alumni indicated that some bachelor paper supervisors are more accessible than others. In terms of diversity the group of assistants is more varied than the instructors: two thirds of the professors are male, and most are Belgian because they often teach a similar course in the Dutch language disciplinary variant of the programme. Half of the teaching assistants, however, are international and just over half are female. Across the board, the panel did not notice – nor did it gather any particular sign – that staff from one university was outperforming the other. On the contrary, both instructors and assistants indicated that they felt very much welcome in the other institution. The main picture the panel gathered from the discussions was one of a very enthusiastic BScSS team that notwithstanding the growing ratio between students and staff remains committed to providing students a first-class education experience.

Student intake

As mentioned already, the programme attracts much more students than anticipated. Right from the start, when the programme had hoped to attract 70-80 students, it welcomed a first cohort of 137 students; this number has further increased to 236 this year and a record 307 students in 2019-2020. While the BScSS does attract students from international secondary schools, it is and has been very popular among Belgian students (42% this year) and with students who obtained their secondary school degree elsewhere in Europe and even beyond. The lower intake this year is mainly due to (non-)European students deciding not to enrol abroad due to COVID-19. The panel gathers from these figures that first of all, there is a real demand for English language (social sciences) bachelor programmes in Belgium; secondly, the figures demonstrate that respected universities offering relatively low-threshold programmes in terms of admission requirements and tuition fees attract a highly diverse student body as is shown by the BScSS which is currently made up of 70 different nationalities.

To monitor the performance of the students, the programme holds a yearly student survey (in-class written questionnaire) after six weeks in the first semester gauging a wide range of student characteristics. These surveys show that most students enrol in the programme right from secondary school, that most students speak English on a regular basis already before enrolling and that most non-Belgian students come to Belgium for this programme. In terms of academic performance, Belgian students perform best. Their familiarity with the Belgian system may be one explanation, along with the advantage of being able to rely on the support from close-by family, friends and other social networks. International students may lack this social capital and/or need to rebuild their social networks. In addition, they pay a higher start-up cost; having to familiarize themselves not only with the Bachelor Social Sciences and academic teaching, but also with Belgian administration, social life, and even work regulations. The yearly surveys have led the programme to organise student tutoring sessions where second and third year students help first year students familiarise with the Belgian system of courses and assessments. These sessions go beyond the 'regular' tutoring sessions on statistics. The panel appreciates the efforts of the programme to manage such diversity in nationality and educational background and to look for ways to accommodate both the highly educated students from privileged backgrounds and an increasingly important group of students who reportedly struggle with the basic demands of higher education. In terms of drop-out and study efficiency the overall BScSS figures do not seem to differ considerably from the other VUB programmes in general and the social sciences programmes in particular. However, the panel suggests the programme investigate why students leave the programme and take steps to prevent unnecessary drop-out. Among other purposes, the obtained information could be of use for refining the description of the expected student profile in the public information and promotion material of the programme.

Facilities

BScSS students can make use of the services provided by VUB and UGent, including the VUB Study Guidance Centre. Students use the institutions' different electronic learning platforms: Canvas at VUB and Ufora at UGent. The panel gathered from the materials and the discussions that in general students are satisfied with the student services and the learning facilities at both institutions. They appreciate the availability of the instructors and assistants, as well as the efforts of the administrative support staff. If anything, both staff and students indicated that due to COVID-19, there were considerable waiting lists for specialised services in English such as a student psychologist. Furthermore, the panel learned that with the growing student numbers, classrooms for seminars such as statistics or research methods are getting small. Some courses, moreover, are open to students from other programmes or exchange programmes; the sheer number of students in class requires instructors to adjust the teaching format and the assessment. In line with previous considerations, the panel calls upon the programme management to take up quantity issues with their respective institutions – and the institutions to assume responsibility – as the current quality of the programme can no longer be ensured when the growing number of students is not followed by growth in staff, support and facilities.

Quality assurance

The materials and discussions have shown that the BScSS programme is very self-critical and reflective of its performance. In terms of quality assurance, the panel appreciates in particular that the voice of students is looked for – and heard – in different formal and informal ways at both the level of individual courses and the overall programme. Students are allowed to issue criticism and feel safe to do so. Teaching staff trains students to be critical with academic theory and at the same time allows students to be critical about the teachers' performance. Students and alumni indicated that they can address their individual and group concerns with the teaching staff and the administrators, and that their issues are taken up by the programme management.

Communication

Finally, students and alumni mentioned that the BScSS programme is doing well in terms of communication both prior to enrolment and during the three years of study. In this respect, students found that the programme is living up to the expectations it generated prior to enrolment. If anything, the programme could provide (even) more guidance on how to interpret the grading system in Belgium as students and alumni indicated they often had a hard time understanding whether e.g. 15/20 was a decent score. In several students' home countries such score would not always be considered as positively as in Belgium. The panel also gathered that in terms of overall programme quality, the various quality assurance instruments and procedures are synthesized in a Public Information document, which is made available on the VUB website and updated following every peer review session.

How is the realisation of teaching aims verified?

System of assessment

The assessment policy of the BScSS programme follows the main educational principles of the VUB. Exams are organised at the end of each semester; re-sits are organised at the end of the academic year; students who only need to finish the bachelor paper can do so in December and graduate in January. The programme's overarching assessment principle is the alignment between programme learning outcomes, learning goals and contents of individual courses and the respective assessment formats.

The programme strives towards a mixture of evaluation formats, both formative and summative. The assessment matrix featuring the different exam forms per course shows that across the curriculum there is a variety of evaluation formats. Some courses consist of different evaluation methods, such as the Current Issues seminar or the Communicating Scientific Knowledge course because these modules combine knowledge transfer with learning-by-doing. The panel established on the basis of the assessment matrix and the discussions with teaching staff, students and alumni that there is indeed alignment between

programme, courses and evaluation formats. Moreover, the panel understood from the materials and the discussions that the large and growing number of students is constraining the amount of feedback instructors originally intended and still would like to provide. The panel appreciates that students are offered mock exams or example questions in order to prepare for exams. In this way the programme enhances the opportunities of all students to prepare properly and pass the exam successfully. The interview sessions also demonstrated to the panel that the day-to-day reality of programme implementation in terms of assessment reflects the evaluation principles of reliability, validity and transparency that were extensively described in the SER. Finally, the panel learned that the BScSS programme has formalised its examination culture and practices in 2019, and that students are informed regularly about plagiarism and its consequences.

Quality of thesis assessment

The panel noticed from the sample it reviewed that the evaluation of bachelor papers is done meticulously and extensively with supervisors providing insightful feedback to underpin their appreciation of the respective criteria and the overall score. In fact, panel members overall agreed to the scores obtained by the students with highly scored papers being definitely of better quality than those receiving an average score or a mere pass. Furthermore, the panel understood from the discussion that while assessors provide an appreciation per criterion on a five-point scale, these individual criteria do not have a particular weight but add up to an overall impression and appreciation which in turn results in a final grade. In order to ensure the calibration of scores across papers, the bachelor paper coordinator compares the evaluation forms and looks for inconsistencies in scores and feedback.

Achieved learning outcomes

The panel understood from the materials and discussions that the bachelor paper is the 'masterpiece', the proof that students have reached the exit qualifications of the BScSS programme. The sample of bachelor papers the panel reviewed indeed demonstrates that students have reached this level: the papers with a mere pass score were definitely up to par with what can be expected of a final product at academic bachelor level, while papers with a high score could stand the test of a master thesis. Hence, it is fair to state according to the panel that students who successfully complete the bachelor paper have reached the BScSS programme-specific learning outcomes.

The post-programme trajectory of bachelor graduates is also indicative of the degree to which the learning outcomes have been achieved. The panel understood from alumni data in the SER and the discussions that the vast majority of graduates move on to a master programme. Contrary to the programme's initial assumption that students would enrol in a master programme in the disciplinary domain of their chosen bachelor track, several graduates in fact chose to sign up for a master programme with a distinctly interdisciplinary character. Alumni indicated to the panel that they are doing well in their follow-up programmes and that the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach of the BScSS has prepared them very well – often much better than their fellow students - for the challenges of a master programme. Based on what the panel gathered from the bachelor papers, the written materials and the online discussions, this statement does not come as a surprise but confirms the panel's impression that the BScSS programme is a high quality programme in design, delivery and outcome.

3 Assessment

The panel assessing the quality of the Bachelor of Science in Social Sciences, which is offered by the inter-university partnership of VUB and UGent, judges the overall quality of the programme to be good. In view of this holistic judgement, the panel issues a positive advice to NVAO.

In the run-up to this accreditation visit, the BScSS programme has produced a well-written self-evaluation report that provides comprehensive and useful information on the first five years of the programme and on its plans for the near future. The stakeholder representatives have demonstrated during the interviews that the daily reality of the programme coincides with the presentation in the SER. According to the panel, both the materials and the discussions demonstrate that the programme representatives have a strong sense of critical self-reflection.

The BScSS takes up a unique position in the Belgian / Flemish higher education landscape of social sciences. It clearly fills a niche and does so to the extent that from a quantitative point of view, the programme is almost becoming a victim of its own success.

The domain specific learning outcomes are adequate in stipulating the domain, level and orientation of the programme. The newly formulated programme specific learning outcomes are aligned to the domain specific outcomes and represent very well what this programme is all about. The panel thinks highly of the intellectual ambition of the programme: the interdisciplinary curriculum, the transdisciplinary nature, the critical and problem-centred approach, the attention to research methodology, etc. The teaching philosophy is not only particularly suited for this type of programme but also constitutes an important feature and strength of the programme. The diversity – both in terms of incoming students and course contents – constitutes an additional dimension of the programme that according to the panel is worth cherishing and developing.

The panel has encountered a very enthusiastic and energetic BScSS team displaying a genuine 'esprit de corps'. Notwithstanding their individual departmental and institutional belonging and the growing ratio between students and staff – the team members are providing students a first-class education experience. Moreover, the disciplinary and didactic quality of the course instructors and teaching assistants, as well as their personal commitment to the programme and its students are excellent.

BScSS students are allowed to issue criticism and feel safe to do so. The panel appreciates that students are not only trained to be critical with academic theory but are also entitled to reflect and assess on the performance of the programme and the teachers. Students and alumni can address their individual and group concerns with the staff and are heard by the management. They are also positive about the programme's quality of information and level of communication. In this regard, the BScSS programme is definitely living up to the expectations it generated prior to enrolment.

In general students are satisfied with the services and facilities at both VUB and UGent. They appreciate the availability of the instructors and assistants, as well as the efforts of the administrative support staff. Nonetheless, staff and students indicated that due to COVID-19, there were considerable waiting lists for specialised services in English such as a student psychologist.

Programme assessment is built around the principle of alignment between programme learning outcomes, learning goals and contents of individual courses, and the respective assessment formats. The panel considers that the day-to-day assessment reality of the BScSS programme reflects this alignment, as well as the evaluation principles of reliability, validity and transparency.

In its review of a sample of bachelor papers, the panel found that the end level products meet the programme expectations in terms of individual and interdisciplinary research projects. The panel was impressed by the breadth of the subjects which were relevant, challenging and often reflected the personal context of the student. Panel members agreed to the scores given by the assessors and appreciate the insightful feedback students receive on the assessed paper. Moreover, the panel found that bachelor papers with a mere pass score were definitely up to par with what can be expected of a final product at academic bachelor level, while papers with a high score could stand the test of a master thesis. Hence, it is fair to state that students who successfully complete the bachelor paper have reached the BScSS programme-specific learning outcomes.

The vast majority of BScSS graduates move on to a master programme with several students signing up for a programme with a distinctly interdisciplinary character. Based on what it gathered from the bachelor papers, the written materials and the discussions, this finding does not come as a surprise but confirms the panel's impression that the BScSS is a high quality programme in design, delivery and outcome.

Amidst all positive findings the panel considers that there is one element that may jeopardise a continued high quality programme implementation in the future. The success of the BScSS programme in terms of student numbers threatens the delivery of the programme along the lines of the current teaching philosophy with room for class interaction, small group work, individual bachelor paper supervision and personalised feedback. While the benefits of inter-university cooperation clearly outweigh the disadvantages, the institutional setting does seem to hamper the allocation of sufficient staff to uphold this teaching philosophy with growing student numbers. The panel therefore calls upon the institutional top management to assume its responsibility and allocate sufficient human and material resources to maintain the current high level of programme quality.

The panel thinks highly of the quality of the BScSS programme. Nonetheless, there is room for improvement regarding the further development of the programme. The panel therefore issues a number of recommendations that do not affect its overall positive judgement on the programme. First and foremost, the panel recommends the institutional top management to allocate sufficient additional human and material resources to the programme. Moreover, the panel advises the programme management to look into the opportunities of co-teaching, to investigate why students leave the programme and take steps to prevent unnecessary drop-out, to elaborate the transdisciplinary dimension of social sciences in the curriculum, and to provide more English language training.

4 Review process

The assessment was carried out in line with the 'Assessment framework programme conduct-tailored accreditation – October 2018'.

The panel prepared itself for the assessment on the basis of the self-evaluation report prepared by the programme when applying for accreditation. Prior to the preparatory meeting each panel member formulated key findings on the programme, i.e. strengths, points for attention and issues that required further clarification. The secretary compiled these first impressions in a document that served as a basis for discussion during the preparatory panel meeting.

The panel met twice to prepare for the accreditation visit. During a first meeting on 14 April 2021, the panel was informed on the assessment framework and the appreciative approach and discussed the key findings from the document review. During the second meeting on 21 April 2021, the panel listed the questions per session and discussed the findings from the bachelor paper review.

The site visit took place on 22 April 2021. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the visit was organised online. The panel spoke to representatives of the programme, as well as with teaching assistants, professors, students and alumni. Using the appreciative approach, the panel has gathered additional information on the different aspects of the programme. During a closed meeting on 22 April 2021 the panel discussed all information obtained and translated it into a holistic judgement. The panel took this conclusion in full independence.

All information obtained led to a draft assessment report that has been sent to all panel members. The feedback from the panel members has been processed. The assessment report adopted by the chairman was submitted to NVAO on 31 May 2021.

Annex 1: Administrative data regarding the institution and the programme

Institution	VUB – Vrije Universiteit Brussel (coordinator) UGent – Ghent University (partner)
Address, institution website	Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels; www.vub.be Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 25, 9000 Gent; www.ugent.be
Status institution	Publicly funded higher education institutions
Programme	Bachelor of Science in Social Sciences
Level and orientation	Academic Bachelor
(Additional) title	Bachelor of Science in Social Sciences
(Parts of) field of study(s)	Social Sciences
Specialisations	-
Programme routes	Political Science, Sociology, Communication Science
Locations	Brussels & Ghent
Teaching language	English
Study load (in credits)	180 ECTS
Connecting options and potential further education	The self-evaluation report lists 8 MSc degrees at VUB, 7 MSc degrees at UGent and 1 inter-university partnership Master programme that give direct access to BScSS graduates

Annex 2: Programme-specific learning outcomes

Knowledge

1. Knows and can elaborate on the most important theories, currents and concepts prevailing in the domain of the social sciences.
2. Knows the historical developments that have occurred in the fields of sociology, political sciences and communication sciences over time.
3. Knows the cross-sections, the intersections and the cross-fertilisations that exist amongst the different social sciences.
4. Knows the historical, political, juridical and socio-economic structures that shape the activities and define the agency of political institutions, private and public social organisations and media-organisations in Europe.
5. Knows and can explain the multi-layered and complex character of social, political and media-related facts and phenomena.
6. Knows and can reflect critically on the main institutions, actors and processes of decision-making and policymaking in Europe and its neighbours.
7. Knows the methods of data selection, management and analysis that prevail within the domains of the social sciences.

Competences

8. Can interpret and analyse contemporary social phenomena and problems and can take position, relying on contemporary theories in the domain of the social sciences, in debates on them.
9. Can, independently, apply insights from various social science disciplines in his/her/their analyses of contemporary social phenomena, and weigh of the respective (dis)advantages of applying specific disciplinary lenses.
10. Can critically position his/her/their research against the theories that prevail in the international social sciences literature, including recent developments and innovations in these literatures.
11. Can, independently, identify, gather and critically process relevant sources and literature on a specific social sciences research topic.
12. Can, with limited supervision, apply social theories and concepts to a well-delineated, socially and scientifically relevant research topic in the domain of the social sciences.
13. Can, with limited supervision, formulate a valid scientific research question on a social sciences research topic.
14. Can, with limited supervision, set up a scientific and methodologically correct research design to answer a research question in the domain of the social sciences.
15. Can, with limited supervision, perform the necessary methodological steps (data selection, processing and management, and analysis) to answer a research question on a social sciences research topic.
16. Can report, independently, on his/her/their research in both oral and written form.
17. Can work in team and collaborate with peers in a relationship of mutual respect.
18. Can reflect on and evaluate his/her/their learning process and research and can deal with criticism in a constructive manner.
19. Treats the intellectual property of others with respect and integrity.
20. Can deploy his/her/their knowledge and skills to counter generalisations and stereotypes in society, media and politics.

Annex 3: Composition of the panel

The assessment was made by a panel of experts convened and appointed by the NVAO. The panel is composed as follows:

Marc Vermeulen (*chair*)

Professor Strategy Non-Profit and academic course director, TIAS School for Business and Society. Former Professor of Sociology of Education at Tilburg University and Open University NL. Honorary Professor Public Management, Stellenbosch University. Owner of V-Square consultancy & governance. Former chair/member of accreditation boards.

Dario Castiglione (*member*)

Reader/Associate Professor in Political Theory, University of Exeter. Gaetano Mosca Chair, University of Turin (2007-2008). Senior Research Fellow, Georgetown University (2003-2005). Visiting Fellow or Professor at Australia National University, University of Bremen, European University Institute, New School University (New York). D.Phil., University of Sussex.

Sophie Vanonckelen (*member*)

Policy officer at a public institution in Belgium. Lecturer at Brothers of Charity. Holds an MSc in Conflict and Development and an MA in Oriental Languages and cultures, both from UGent.

Albert Gili Moreno (*student member*)

Master student in Political Analysis at the Open University of Catalonia. Holds a BSc in Political Science and Administration, University of Barcelona. Student Board member of EQ-Arts. Student expert AQU Catalunya. Student member in several accreditation boards.

The panel was assisted by:

- **Mark Frederiks**, policy advisor Flanders NVAO, process coordinator;
- **Mark Delmartino**, secretary.

All panel members and the process coordinator/secretary have signed NVAO's code of deontology.

Annex 4: Schedule of the site visit

Thursday 22 April 2021 – online meeting

Time	Meeting
09.00	Programme directors and SER coordinators
10.15	Teaching assistants
11.15	Students
12.30	Lunch & internal meeting panel
13.30	Professors
14.45	Programme directors and SER coordinators
15.30	Internal meeting panel
17.00	Concluding dialogue

Annex 5: Overview of the material studied

Information file

- Bachelor of Science in Social Sciences. Self-Evaluation Report, January 2021.

Annexes to the information file:

- VUB-UGent Partnership agreement BScSS
- BScSS Organisational Chart
- BSc International student population
- International press coverage of the BScSS programme
- Validated domain-specific learning outcomes
- Programme-specific learning outcomes
- Relation between domain-specific and programme-specific learning outcomes
- Schematic overview of the BScSS curriculum
- Overview of programme-specific learning outcomes per course
- Overview of teaching formats per course
- Overview of evaluation formats per course
- Enrolment requirements
- Overview of course prerequisites
- Overview of master programmes @ VUB and UGent – BScSS direct access
- BScSS staff
- University-wide facilities for BScSS students
- Guidance path mathematics and statistics
- Overview of international guest lectures
- internationalisation policies

Documents made available during or leading up to the dialogue

- Representative sample of bachelor theses and their evaluation forms

Colofon

BSc IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

VUB - UGENT (9942)

Conduct-tailored accreditation • Assessment report

31 May 2021

Composition: NVAO • Vlaanderen



Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie
Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders

Parkstraat 83 • 2514 JG Den Haag
P.O. Box 85498 • 2508 CD The Hague
The Netherlands

T +31 (0)70 312 23 00
E info@nvao.net
www.nvao.net