

Onderwijsvisitatie Rechten

Een onderzoek naar de kwaliteit van Master of European Social Security van de KU Leuven

30 mei 2016

Master of European Social Security - Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

Introduction

This report concerns the Master of European Social Security at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven). The assessment panel visited the study programme from 6 to 8 October 2014.

The panel assesses the study programme on the basis of the three generic quality standards (GQSs) of the VLUHR programme assessment framework. This framework is designed to fulfil the accreditation requirements applied by the NVAO. For each generic quality standard the panel gives a weighted and motivated judgment on a four-point scale: 'unsatisfactory', 'satisfactory', 'good' or 'excellent'. In the assessment of generic quality assurance, the concept of '*generic quality*' indicates that the particular GQS is in place and that the programme - or a specific mode of the programme - meets the quality level that can reasonably be expected, from an international perspective, of a Master's programme in higher education. The score 'satisfactory' indicates that the programme demonstrates an acceptable level for the particular GQS. If the study programme scores 'good', the programme systematically exceeds the generic quality for that standard. If the programme scores 'excellent', its level of achievement is well above the generic quality for the particular GQS and serves as an (inter)national example. The score 'unsatisfactory' indicates that the programme does not attain the generic quality for that particular GQS.

The panel's opinions are supported by facts and analyses. The panel makes clear how it has reached its opinion. It also expresses a final opinion on the quality of the programmes as a whole, also according to the same four-point scale. Judgements and recommendations made relate to the programmes with all subordinate modes or majors, unless stated otherwise.

The panel assesses the quality of the programme as it has been established at the time of the site visit. The panel has based its judgement on the self-evaluation report and the information that arose from the interviews with the programme management, with lecturers, students, alumni and personnel responsible at programme level for internal quality assurance, internationalisation, study guidance and student tutoring. The panel has also examined the course materials, master's theses, assignments and standard answering formats and numerous relevant reports available. For the student success rate, the panel called on data provided by the Datawarehouse Hoger Onderwijs (DHO). The panel has also visited specific educational facilities such as classrooms and the library.

In addition to its judgement, the panel also formulates recommendations with respect to quality improvement. In this manner, the panel aims to contribute to improving the quality of the programme. The recommendations are included in the relevant sections of the respective generic quality standards. At the end of the report an overview is given of improvement suggestions.

The Master of European Social Security was initiated in 1998. During the academic year 1999-2000, it was recognised as a master-after-master programme. The programme directors initiated some major innovations in the programme in 2013, viz. the launching of a Summer School and the introduction of two options to meet the diverging interests of two different student populations: a practice-oriented track and a research-oriented track.

The programme is organised within the Faculty of Law of the KU Leuven. The Faculty Board is responsible for the education as well as for organising and monitoring the quality of education.

In the academic year 2012-2013, 14 students were enrolled on the programme.

Generic quality standard 1 - Targeted Outcome Level

The assessment panel evaluates the targeted outcome level as satisfactory.

The Master of European Social Security is, according to the SER, a **specialised, multidisciplinary and research-based** programme, 'dealing with the broader domain of social security'. The programme aims to ensure that graduates 'gain a broader understanding of a wide range of issues in social security, as well as the capacity to critically reflect on policy matters at home and abroad'. The programme and its educational approach encourage participants to engage in profound scientific reflection on social security and to translate these scientific findings into concrete policy conclusions and proposals.

This profile has been translated into seven domain-specific criteria. Given these learning outcomes, the panel finds that the programme is striving for an **advanced level**. The programme learning outcomes comply with the Flemish qualification framework. However, these learning outcomes are not (yet) adapted to the 2013 renewal of the programme and division into two tracks (particularly with regard to the practice-oriented track). In reality students are well informed about these changes, so only the learning outcomes require an update. The panel understands that the introduction of a practice-oriented and research track has made the programme more comprehensible and therefore more appealing to students.

The panel finds that the programme-specific learning outcomes coincide with the domain-specific learning outcomes, although the correspondence is sometimes a bit minimalistic. While the domain-specific learning outcomes stress the importance of independent and critical thinking, as well as broad and in-depth knowledge, these terms receive less (or no) emphasis in the programme-specific learning outcomes. These aspects are implicitly embedded in the learning outcomes, but should be made more explicit. At the same time, the SER is right to say that at some points the programme-specific learning outcomes **particularise** the domain-specific learning outcomes, especially by emphasising the multidisciplinary, multinational and comparative character of the programme.

The assessment panel acknowledges that students are encouraged to think beyond their national approach and their own discipline. However, it might be wondered if the explicitly **multidisciplinary approach** is not a little too ambitious (this was a remark made by the previous assessment panel in 2006 too). The panel finds that the second programme-specific learning outcome ('the student is able to put his national/monodisciplinary approach in a broader perspective by including other disciplines and abandoning a merely national point of view') is a much more appropriate and realistic objective, than the use (elsewhere) of the term 'multidisciplinary'.

The programme, in the specific way it is taught and set up, is nearly without parallel elsewhere in Europe. Equivalent programmes are scarce. Probably due to this lack of intra-disciplinary competition, no serious benchmarking has been made in the SER. The panel would argue, however, that benchmarking is always useful, even when the comparison is with programmes which are not 100% similar. Nevertheless, the panel takes the view that the programme-specific learning outcomes match the requirements from the professional field.

Although the programme profile itself is clear enough, (international) **visibility** remains a weak point. Social security as such seems not to be the most 'fashionable' subject to potential students. As student figures remain relatively low, a stronger marketing policy will be required. Another strategy that the assessment panel would like to suggest is to embed the programme more in

national and supranational networks dealing with social security. The recent involvement of the programme in EFESE (European Format for Exchange in Social Security Education) is certainly a good starting point. Also alumni could play a bigger role in promoting the programme.

In conclusion, the panel finds that the programme learning outcomes comply with all formal requirements, although an update is required to align them with the recent division into two tracks. The panel acknowledges the comparative and multidisciplinary approach, but care should be taken to ensure that the concept of multidisciplinary is well defined. The programme also needs to become more visible to the outside world.

Generic quality standard 2: Learning Process

The assessment panel evaluates the learning process as satisfactory.

The Master of European Social Security counts 60 ECTS and consists of one year. The programme offers a practice-oriented and a research track. Both tracks have 30 ECTS in common (including two Summer School courses) as well as 30 ECTS track-specific courses. The programme starts during the **Executive Summer School** in Social Security with two compulsory courses: ‘Comparative study of social security systems’ and ‘Social security law, policy and economics’, each representing 10 ECTS. All students also take the courses ‘European Social Security Law’ and ‘Global Social Law’. These two courses, which are taught via contact teaching but can be followed by distance learning as well, are not exclusive to students of the Master of European Social Security alone.

The **practice-oriented track** of the programme includes a three-month full-time internship at an international or European social security institution or, under strict conditions, with the student’s own employer. This also includes the writing of a reflective report as a Master’s paper (16 ECTS). Another compulsory course covers the writing of reports and tender proposals. Finally, students select two out of three elective courses.

The **research track** is open to a maximum of six students who follow an individualised programme in light of their prospective PhD topic. This programme includes at least 12 ECTS of methodological courses offered at KU Leuven or in other universities with whom the Faculty of Law has an agreement. Furthermore, students follow one course of KU Leuven Master programmes. All research students are monitored as they develop an advanced research proposal as a Master’s paper (15 ECTS), meeting the requirements of a PhD proposal.

The programme is mainly based on self-study. The number of study periods in Leuven is kept to a minimum: the students are obliged to attend classes only in the Summer School courses and for some lectures during the residential week around Easter. These two periods have been inserted in the curriculum with a view to strengthening the **community feeling** among students (and staff). The students that were interviewed by the assessment panel confirmed that the Summer School is particularly beneficial for cohesion and getting to know the other students.

Students receive the **course materials** for the Summer School two months before the start. They are required to read these materials in advance, in order to keep abreast of the class discussions. The lecture materials of all other courses are handed over by the end of the Summer School. Some courses are published on the electronic learning platform Toledo. During the periods of self-study, students are supported via a programme-specific community on **Toledo**, with information about course content, study guides and communication with teachers and fellow students. According to the assessment panel, the current learning platform is rather basic and traditional. The panel recommends that the programme invest in more contemporary online learning applications, in line with new technical possibilities.

Students of the practice-oriented track have to complete a (full-time) three-month **internship** with an international organisation, social security administration or other institution. Interns are supported by an internship supervisor at the workplace, and by the internship coordinator in Leuven. The latter collects the documents of the intern and helps to address questions or problems that may arise. The internship supervisor assists the intern in day-to-day work. According to the SER, the internship work ‘must be substantially in the field of social security and social protection’. It should serve to acquaint the student with different features of the field, and include a specific

research project suggested by the internship supervisor and accepted by the programme directors. This project will address an issue ‘in light of current trends and challenges regarding the functioning and effectiveness of social security policy, services and organisations’. Students have to write a **reflective report** on their experiences and new insights gained during their work.

Students admitted to the research track write an **advanced research proposal**. Students can propose their own topic, which must be accepted by the staff. Students are guided through an individualised course package, including (methodological) courses on how to create a research proposal. One staff member, specialised in the field of methodology and research design, serves as a mentor to the students during the writing of the proposal.

During the on-site visit the panel learned that students perceive the programme as **coherent** (‘you realise how everything is interconnected’). Students as well as alumni confirmed to the panel that the curriculum allows them to see different perspectives of social security and that this creates a more holistic view - ‘the broader picture’ - of the subject. Some students would like to have a broader range of optional courses. In this respect, a representative of the professional field claimed that, given the extent of the domain of social security, the introduction of various options might be recommended. The panel acknowledges this desire, but also stresses such an extension should not be to the detriment of the programme.

The **admission criteria** are clear. Participants must have a university degree (Master of Laws or equivalent) representing at least four years of study in law, criminology, economics or applied economics, political sciences, sociology, communication sciences, public health, medicine or dentistry. In exceptional cases, this requirement is waived, for example when the applicant has long-term involvement in social security or an equivalent academic degree in another discipline. Admission is further based on scientific qualification (shown by the applicant’s study and research record), experience in social security, openness to other disciplines and other national contexts, and a demonstrable European orientation. A good proficiency in English is a necessity.

The programme is **limited** to approximately 35 participants. A group of about ten persons is considered to be a minimum. The panel has ascertained that the programme seeks a fair distribution between male and female participants, as well as students from various different countries of origin. Most participants work in social security administrations, social security organisations, sickness funds, trade unions and organisations for the self-employed. Some are interested in broadening their knowledge of social security after finishing a Master’s programme.

The **admission criteria to the research track** are transparent and depend on exam results at the end of the Summer School and the scientific research capacities of the applicant. It is feasible that some students who are not admitted to the research track will drop out rather than take the practice-oriented track. In this respect, it is important to note that the Summer School is a recognised post-academic programme. Students who successfully complete this programme receive a certificate. If they choose to take up the Master’s programme at a later stage, they can do so while retaining their credits for up to five years.

The **teaching staff** consists of five professors from KU Leuven and six professors from foreign (European) universities. Other teachers come from social security administrations or private companies. The KU Leuven professors are all employed full-time at KU Leuven. The programme has also two assistants from the Institute of Social Law of the Faculty of Law involved (albeit on a low scale). The SER states that most guest lecturers, even though they work on a purely voluntary basis,

remain committed to the programme. Given the low student numbers, the student-staff ratio is adequate. The assessment panel acknowledges the quality of the staff. All lecturers are (international) **authorities** in their respective domains. Their personal commitment to the programme is beyond doubt. However, the enthusiasm of a few persons also involves risks. Steps should be taken to ensure that the current dependence on a relatively small core of teachers will not endanger the continuity of the programme.

The **educational facilities** are adequate. Nearly all classes are organised in College De Valk in Leuven. The auditoria and tutorial rooms are well equipped and up-to-date. The law library has a virtually complete range of all existing printed and online sources of Belgian, European and international law. Students use the library during their visits to Leuven. They have also access to the vast electronic collection.

The panel learned that students as well as alumni are satisfied with the **support and guidance** they receive(d). No significant flaws have been signalled with regard to the overall organisation of the programme. According to the DHO data, every year about 10-20% of the students drop out without obtaining the diploma. The assessment panel understands that, given the particular composition of the student group (people who already have a job and/or a family), these figures are acceptable. About 70-75% of students who graduate manage to do this within one year (sometimes even 100%).

The programme does not have a programme-specific educational committee, but is embedded in the POC Rechten, a Standing Educational Committee encompassing all Law courses. This POC has monthly meetings and advises the Faculty Board on educational matters. All professors with teaching responsibilities within the LL.M. programme are part of the POC Rechten, together with delegations of assistants and students.

The programme team aims to have a formal meeting in Leuven with all the staff every five years, which seems quite a long interval to the panel. Students meet twice a year with the staff to evaluate their experience and discuss possible improvements. According to the SER, 'we feel that students are quite open during these sessions'. Proceedings of these meetings show that the input of the students is taken seriously. Standardised student surveys, the assessment panel was told, are hard to organise given the small number of students: at university level, all courses are subject to an online student evaluation held every two years, but a minimum number of participants is required. It is clear that the **internal quality assurance** of the programme is merely based on informal contacts, but nevertheless functions to everyone's satisfaction.

The programme has created its **alumni association**, which was a recommendation by the previous assessment panel. The alumni have their own academic event every two years, within the European Institute of Social Security's (EISS) annual conference.

In conclusion, the panel is satisfied with the overall quality of the programme. Students are trained to apply the acquired knowledge, to substantiate opinions and to think beyond their own discipline and national context. As for the introduction of two tracks, the panel is of the opinion that the management must ensure that the high academic standard of the current learning outcomes continues to be met, in particular for the practice-oriented track.

Generic quality standard 3 - Outcome Level Achieved

The assessment panel evaluates the outcome level achieved as satisfactory.

Examinations are generally **planned** during the semester examination periods: January, June and (for the second term) August. There are some exceptions where examinations are organised outside these periods. For each examination, students can request feedback within five days after receiving their results. Following KU Leuven policy, an independent person is assigned as ombudsperson to mediate when there is a problem with the examination or examination result.

The assessment panel appreciates the variation in **evaluation methods**. These differ according to each course and track (for the practice-oriented track for instance, more practical courses require more practical examination methods). Overall, most examinations are organised in written format. For the elective courses, there are written open-book examinations with essay questions. Students take these examinations from home via e-mail. Two of the four compulsory courses are evaluated through a multiple-choice examination. The other two compulsory courses are orally examined (and closed-book). Students who do not remain in Leuven take their exam via webcam.

As a result, the two basic courses of the Summer School have an oral and multiple-choice examination. According to the SER this was a deliberate choice, 'in order to acquire a good understanding of the knowledge and insight of the students'. It is stated that 'these examinations allow the teachers to see whether the students have understood the course materials and are able to de-nationalise their knowledge'.

Other evaluation methods include exercises, take-home exams and an opposition and defence exercise. Students receive take-home assignments for both courses taught during the Summer School, to show their understanding of the content as well as skills in presenting their findings in a comparative paper. For 'Report- and tender-writing' students are asked to submit a tender for a contract for legal assistance in matters of European and national security law. In the course on 'Global social law' students present their own paper to a group of other students.

For examinations covering course units given by different teachers, each teacher forwards examination questions. The course coordinator in Leuven is responsible for making the final examination paper. The teachers are informed about the KU Leuven standards, in order to make sure that they score their own question in accordance with the scoring system of KU Leuven.

Any changes in the evaluation methods are discussed by the Standing Educational Committee (POC) Rechten. Whether at the professor's own initiative (in order to better comply with the predefined learning outcomes for his or her course) or at the students' initiative (based on the feedback forms), it is the POC that debates and decides on the proposed change. Prior to the on-site visit, the panel viewed a selection of **exam questions** and finds their quality satisfactory. The panel values the role that the POC is currently playing in setting up an evaluation policy, but this should be made more formal yet and not only retroactive.

Students following the practice-oriented track write a reflective report on their internship, while students following the research track write an advanced research proposal. The evaluation of the internship is based on the assessment of the **reflective report** by a committee of three evaluators (two professors and one assistant). The internship supervisor also fills in an evaluation form on the

skills of the intern, but this is (for reasons of objectivity) not taken into account for the final evaluation.

Students admitted to the research track write an **advanced research proposal** meeting the requirements of a PhD proposal at the Faculty of Law. The final grading of the advanced research proposal is done by two professors and one assistant. None of the evaluators are involved in the support of the student during the year in order to make an objective grading possible. According to the SER, the advanced research proposal must have a comparative and/or European perspective, and must have a multi- or interdisciplinary character.

Prior to the on-site visit, the assessment panel read an ample selection of **Master's theses**. It should be taken into account that these were written before the 2013-2014 division into two tracks. The panel finds the quality of the Master's theses satisfactory, and according to the quotations that were graded. Nevertheless, it has to be acknowledged that the multidisciplinaryity that is so strongly stressed in the learning outcomes is not really visible in the Master's theses (even the good ones).

With regard to the introduction of two tracks, the panel appreciates the fact that the reflective report and the advanced research proposal each has its own detailed and standardised **evaluation form**. The evaluation criteria for both the reflective report and the advanced research proposal are clear and transparent.

The SER provides no information on the **employability** of its graduates. As already stated in GQS2, most students already have a job. Based on the quality of evaluation, the Master's theses and the on-site interviews, the panel is convinced that graduates can find a good job in line with the programme content. This certainly rings true for the research track, with its high standards and strict intake policy (see GQS2). Based on the internship criteria and evaluation format, the panel is confident that the practice-oriented track will also prove its worth.

The **diploma output** is generally high with over 70% of the students graduating.

The programme management expects that the recent curriculum reform will have a positive influence on the study yield. According to the SER, the programme now expects that some students will not start the Master of European Social Security if they are not admitted to the research track at the end of the Summer School.

In conclusion, the panel has observed a good variety in evaluation and finds that examinations are transparent and relevant to the objectives of the programme. However, the 'old regime' Master's theses, although perfectly good in their own right, did not yet put the multidisciplinary approach into practice. This may change with the recent introduction of a reflective report and advanced research proposal. A kind of evaluation policy has been initiated - mainly through the POC - but this should be further developed and made more explicit. The study yield is adequate, but data regarding employability is so far non-existent.

Final judgement of the assessment panel

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| Generic quality standard 1 - Targeted Outcome Level | S |
| Generic quality standard 2 - Learning Process | S |
| Generic quality standard 3 - Outcome Level Achieved | S |

As generic quality standard 1 is evaluated as satisfactory, generic quality standard 2 is evaluated as satisfactory, and generic quality standard 3 is evaluated as satisfactory, according to the decision rules, the final judgement of the assessment panel on the Master of European Social Security is satisfactory.

Summary of the recommendations for further improvement of the study programme

Generic Quality Standard 1 - Targeted Outcome Level

- Rethink the programme-specific learning outcomes, especially to adapt them to the new curriculum with its two tracks.
- Reflect on the feasibility of an overtly multidisciplinary focus, and try to define better what is meant by this concept.
- Consider benchmarking the learning outcomes with programmes that are somewhat related.
- Improve the visibility of the programme to the outside world, put more effort into promotion and integration in other networks.

Generic Quality Standard 2 - Learning Process

- Use Toledo in a less traditional way by investing in new online learning methods and techniques.
- Ensure that the programme does not become overly dependent on a small core of lecturers.

Generic Quality Standard 3 - Outcome Level Achieved

- Ensure that the Master's theses - regardless of the chosen track - maintain an elevated academic level and demonstrate more of a multidisciplinary approach.
- Provide data regarding the employability of graduates.
- Continue developing the evaluation policy that has started within the POC.