

THE EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT

Urban Studies

An evaluation of the quality of the Master of Science in Urban Studies
at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel

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Brussels - February 2013

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URBAN STUDIES**

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Ravensteingalerij 27
1000 Brussels
T +32 (0)2 792 55 00
F +32(0)2 211 41 99

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PREFACE BY THE VICE-CHAIR OF THE STEERING COMMITTEE OF THE QUALITY ASSURANCE UNIT

In this document, the review panel reports on the outcomes of the educational assessment of the academic master's programme 'the Master of Science in Urban Studies', delivered by the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. The panel comments on the findings, judgments and recommendations resulting from its educational assessment, conducted in Autumn 2012. This initiative is part of the mandate of the Flemish Higher Education Council (VLUHR) on the external quality assurance of higher education in Flanders.

This assessment report is primarily intended for the study programme itself. Besides that, the report aspires to provide objective information about the quality of the evaluated study programme to the stakeholders and society at large. Therefore, the report is also published on the VLUHR website.

The report provides a snapshot of the study programme and thus represents only one phase in the process of continuous care for educational quality. After all, even after just a short period of time, the study programme may already have changed and improved, whether or not in response to the findings and recommendations of the assessment panel.

On behalf of the Steering Committee of the Quality Assurance Unit of the VLUHR, I would like to express my gratitude to the chair and the members of the review panel for their time and high level of expertise and dedication with which they have fulfilled this assignment. However, the external assessment has only been possible thanks to the efforts and commitment of all those involved in the study programme. We therefore also want to express our gratitude and thanks to them.

Hopefully the study programme will experience this report as a critical reflection of its efforts and as an additional incentive and encouragement for the continuous improvement of the quality of its education.

Nik Heerens

Vice-Chair Steering Committee

PREFACE BY THE CHAIRMAN OF THE ASSESSMENT PANEL

The assessment panel has examined the Initial Master's study programmes in Urban Studies at the Flemish Universities. In this report the panel expresses its evaluation of the initial Master's programme '4Cities' at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). The VUB organizes the 4Cities Urban Studies master programme jointly with five other European Universities, namely Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), Universität Wien, KØbenhavns Universitet, Universidad Complutense de Madrid en de Universidad Autónoma de Madrid and with support of the UNICA network.

The assessment panel is grateful to the VUB and the other partner universities for their warm welcome and the cooperative and constructive manner in which they received the assessment panel, responded to its questions and reacted to its suggestions.

The assessment panel has made a thorough evaluation of the study programme. The panel made use of the self-evaluation report and refined its views during the assessment site visit to the VUB. The lengthy discussions with organizing faculty, teaching staff, supporting services, students and alumni have been highly illuminating for grasping the quality of the programme. The panel is therefore convinced that its judgement reflects the real quality of the Urban Studies programme in Flanders.

As will become clear in this report, the overall quality of the evaluated Urban Studies programme is clearly of a high standard. The programme succeeds in offering high quality courses in a range of disciplines related to the broad area of Urban Studies. The panel has met very dedicated teachers and professional academics, all determined to share their knowledge in order to teach the students what they need to succeed in their future professional life. The panel was furthermore impressed by the truly pioneering nature of the international mission of the urban studies programme pursued by the VUB and its five partner institutions in Belgium and Europe.

The assessment panel wishes to express its deep appreciation for dr. ir. Els Van Zele who, as a member of staff of the Quality Assurance Unit of the VLIR, has been a tremendous support to the assessment panel. Her dedication and commitment to the quality of Higher Education has been exemplary. Academics would never be able to carry out quality evaluations without such professional support in terms of planning meetings, organizing visits and editing the reports.

Finally, I would like to thank all the members of the assessment panel for their constructive, open and professional attitude. Chairing this assessment panel has been an agreeable job thanks to their input. I am sure I can speak for all of them saying that we too have benefited from what we have learned.

Prof. dr. Stijn Oosterlynck

Chairman of the assessment panel Urban Studies

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SECTION 1

General section

CHAPTER I

The Urban Studies educational assessment

1 INTRODUCTION

In this report, the assessment panel Urban Studies reports on its findings concerning the academic Initial Master's study programme in Urban Studies at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, which was evaluated in Autumn 2012 on behalf of the Flemish Higher Education Council (VLUHR). This initiative is part of the activities of the VLUHR in the area of external quality assurance and ensures that the Flemish universities are complying with the relevant regulations imposed by law.

2 THE STUDY PROGRAMME INVOLVED

In accordance with its mission, the assessment panel visited The Master of Science in Urban Studies (4Cities) from 26th till 27th September 2012 at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

3 THE ASSESSMENT PANEL

3.1 Composition of the assessment panel

The composition of the assessment panel Urban Studies was ratified on 12th July 2012 by the Higher Education Recognition Panel, (Erkenningscommissie Hoger Onderwijs). The assessment panel was established by the VLIR in its decision, dated 3rd September 2012.

The assessment panel had the following composition:

- Chairman of the assessment panel:
 - **Prof. dr. Stijn Oosterlyncck**, Assistant Professor at the department of Sociology; Universiteit Antwerpen

- Other members of the assessment panel:
 - **Prof. dr. Sophie Watson**, Professor of Sociology at the Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University in Milton Keynes, United Kingdom
 - **Prof. dr. Joseph Heathcott**, Associate Professor of Urban Studies at The New School in New York, USA

- Methodologist panel member of the assessment panel:
 - **Dr. Guido Cuyvers**, Departementshoofd Departement Sociaal Werk, Katholieke Hogeschool Kempen

- Student member of the assessment panel:
 - **Mr. Karel Van den Berghe**, student Bachelor in Geography, Universiteit Gent

Mrs. dr. ir. Els Van Zele, staff member of the Quality Assurance Unit of the Flemish Higher Education Council (VLUHR), was the project manager of the educational assessment Urban Studies and was the secretary of the assessment panel.

The brief curriculum vitae of the members of the assessment panel are listed in Appendix 1.

3.2 Task description

The mission of the assessment panel, which is described in the establishment decision, reads as follows:

- to form a motivated and articulated opinion about the quality of the study programme, described in the six subjects and underlying aspects of the accreditation framework, and where applicable about the special quality features;
- to give an integral final assessment of the study programme which the NVAO will take as its basis for the accreditation;
- to formulate recommendations with respect to possible further improvement of the quality of education and the study programme.

3.3 Method

3.3.1 Preparation

In order to prepare for the assessment of the study programme, the institution was asked to draw up an extensive self-evaluation report. The VLUHR Quality Assurance Unit has made available an assessment protocol for this purpose, which describes in detail the expectations regarding the content of the self-evaluation report. The self-evaluation report follows the accreditation framework. In addition to actual descriptions per subject and per aspect of the accreditation framework, the study programme was also asked to present its future prospects and to include a critical strengths and weaknesses analysis at subject level. In addition, a number of compulsory appendices are included, such as a description of the curriculum, student and staff tables, course descriptions, examination questions, etc.

The assessment panel received the self-evaluation report a number of months before the assessment site visit, allowing for adequate time to carefully study these documents and to thoroughly prepare for the assessment site visit.

The members of the assessment panel were asked to select two Master's theses from a list of recent Master's theses for the study programme. The selected Master's theses were delivered at the Quality Assurance Unit, a few weeks before the assessment site visit. Consequently, each member of the assessment panel was able to thoroughly read at least two Master's theses of the study programme before the site visit took place.

During the preparation phase, the assessment panel formulated its reference frame (*see chapter II*) and the time schedule for the assessment visit was drawn up (*see Appendix 2*) and communicated to the programme management of the study programme.

The assessment panel held its inaugural meeting on the 21st September 2012. At this point, the panel members were already in possession of the assessment protocol and the self-evaluation report. During the preparatory meeting, the panel members were given further information about the assessment process and they made specific preparations for the forthcoming assessment visit and an initial discussion of the self-evaluation report was held.

3.3.2 Visit to the institution

The second source of information – next to the self-evaluation report – comprises the interviews and conversations which the assessment panel conducted during its assessment site visit with all parties involved in the Urban Studies study programme. The university was also asked – as a third source of information – to provide a wide variety of documents, available at the institution during the assessment site visit. During the assessment site visit, sufficient time was scheduled to give the assessment panel the opportunity to study these documents thoroughly.

The documents made available to the assessment panel included the following teaching material (courses, handbooks and syllabuses); portfolio and reports from students, reports by the important policy-making or policy-monitoring bodies (faculty council, study programme panels and departmental councils), documents relating to the internal quality assurance (survey forms, non-staff related evaluation of education), documents concerning the procedures for curriculum reforms, examples of information provision to prospective students, etc. Also an additional number of Master's theses was made available for inspection. When the assessment panel deemed it necessary to obtain additional information in order to support its evaluation, this information was requested during the assessment site visits.

In addition to conversations with those bodies responsible for the study programme, the students, the teaching staff, the faculty and study programme-related policy staff the time schedule included a site visit to the facilities (including the library, laboratories, computer facilities), an interview with graduates of the study programme and a counselling hour during which the assessment panel can invite persons from the study programme or individuals can be heard in confidence.

Conversations and interviews with all stakeholders (from the six contributing universities) were held in an open mind and have been illuminating. They were a helpful supplement to the self-evaluation report. At the end of the assessment site visit, and following internal debate by the assessment panel, the provisional findings were verbally notified in a presentation by the chairman.

3.3.3 Reporting

As the last step in the assessment process, the assessment panel compiled its findings, conclusions and recommendations into the present report. Moreover, in accordance with the provisions for the assessment within the context of the NVAO accreditation of the study programme, it awarded an evaluation of satisfactory/unsatisfactory to the six subjects in the accreditation framework and an evaluation of excellent/good/satisfactory/unsatisfactory to the constituent and underlying aspects of each subject.

The programme directors of the study programme and the responsible bodies at the institution were given the opportunity to respond to the draft report about their study programme. The assessment panel considered this response and included responses from the institution where appropriate during the final editing of the report.

4 BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT

The assessment panel has conducted its assignment with great interest and dedication. It has evaluated – in conformity with its assignment – academic education in the area of Urban Studies study programmes in Flanders. The assessment panel has had the unique opportunity to reflect and debate among peers about the profile, the quality and the future of the academic education in Urban Studies.

With respect to the Master of Urban Studies (4Cities), which is an international study programme with six contributing universities in four capital cities, the assessment panel has only visited the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. However, the panel examined a substantial amount of information and evidence from the other locations, interviewed students both in Brussels and via skype in Denmark, interviewed the staff and programme directors of the various universities who travelled to Brussels to talk to the panel and was adequately informed about the facilities and student counselling at the various universities. The assessment panel therefore argues that it felt fully able to evaluate the overall 4Cities programme.

The educational assessment of the Urban Studies programme was conducted with the VLIR-VLHORA-assessment protocol (February 2005), that is in line with the accreditation requirements. The assessment report will also be used for the application of the accreditation of the study programme.

During the discussions, the assessment panel tried at all times, in a critical and constructive manner, to suggest improvements that can be taken up in future reforms. In its assessment, the panel took into account the particularities of the institutions and the study programme evaluated, and always placed its opinions and suggestions within the specific context of the study programme.

The assessment panel hopes that this assessment report will contribute to the positive evolutions of the academic education in Urban Studies in Flanders. The assessment panel wishes to initiate a debate within the Faculties and university involved in order to analyse in which areas improvement can be made and to which extent this is feasible within the given constraints. The assessment panel further hopes that the present report will provide useful information to the outside world.

The assessment panel was impressed by the dedication and enthusiasm of the staff, the students and alumni of the study programme. The assessment panel cordially thanks all faculty, employees, students and alumni who have contributed to this external evaluation. It deeply appreciates their cooperation and efforts during the preparatory phase as well as through the conversations held during the assessment site visit.

5 STRUCTURE AND ORGANISATION OF THE REPORT

This report consists of two sections. Section one, chapter II, contains a description by the assessment panel of the reference frame on which the assessment of the study programme is based. In chapter III, the scores assigned to the different aspects for the study programme are summarised in a table. The assessment panel emphasises that the table should not be read or interpreted without consulting the report of the study programme.

In section two, the assessment panel reports on the study programme. The recommendations made by the assessment panel are outlined at the end of the report.

6 GENERAL OBSERVATIONS OF THE ASSESSMENT PANEL, LINKED TO THE EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT

It was brought to the attention of the assessment panel that, given the international context of the study programme, it would be useful to have an international evaluation and an international recognition of the accreditation decision, to be accepted by the relevant national authorities as evidence for the quality of its own international study programmes. The panel agrees that such a European framework would prevent the same evaluation to be performed in various countries. In addition, the assessment panel is convinced that the European recognition of quality assurance agencies – as is the case for the Quality Assurance Unit (QAU) of the VLIR since July 2009 – is a useful first step towards a European procedure of accreditation.

During the assessment of the study programme the assessment panel learned that a student's opportunities to enter the Schengen area strongly depends on the nationality of the student: some obtain a VISUM in a few weeks, while others have to wait for almost an entire semester before being allowed to travel to the Schengen area. Particularly for students entering an international programme, this can be very burdensome and even hindering students to conduct their study. The assessment panel therefore asks the relevant local, regional, national and European authorities to take up this issue and to make it possible for students to be allowed in the country in time in order to follow courses.

7 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The assessment panel is firmly of the opinion that the study programme meets the assessment criteria of the assessment framework and the assessment panel recommends to the NVAO that it accredits the study programme accordingly.

CHAPTER II

Reference framework for the Master of Science in Urban Studies

September 2012

1 INTRODUCTION

In order to evaluate an educational programme, the assessment panel uses a reference framework based on formulated objectives, defined final objectives and established quality requirements which should be met by a master programme in Urban Studies.

In compiling the reference framework, the assessment panel took as its inspiration the reference frameworks used to evaluate other comparable master programmes in Flanders and in the Netherlands, the objectives and final requirements formulated by the study programme itself in its self-evaluation report, the Flemish “Act on the restructuring of Higher Education” (2003)¹ and the framework of the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Body (NVAO)² which presents several minimum requirements based on the internationally accepted Dublin descriptors.

The reference framework describes the discipline-specific minimum requirements for the master study programme, the required student profile for a graduate from an interdisciplinary area of Urban Studies and the orientation and transition to the professional world. At the same time, an adequate understanding must exist of the general educational objectives

1 Decree regarding the restructuring of higher education in Flanders (4 April 2003).

2 The accreditation framework for existing institutes of higher education in Flanders, NVAO, 14 February 2005.

and starting points for an academic study programme, the requirements regarding teaching organisation, personnel policy and internal quality assurance. Finally, in order to evaluate the programme's contribution to the production of new knowledge and practice in Urban Studies, the reference framework provides assessment queries regarding the specific contributions of the 4 Cities programme to the broader project of Urban Studies in Europe.

The reference framework was submitted to the programme management team before the actual assessment visit, but after submission of the self-evaluation report. During the assessment visit by the assessment panel, an opportunity is provided to discuss the framework of reference with the programme management.

This reference framework is intended to be used as a guideline for the evaluation of the study programme by the assessment panel, and is not to be looked upon as a strict checklist to tick off all aspects individually. The reference framework describes a number of aspects that the assessment panel will consider when examining and evaluating the quality of a study programme and should be seen as an appropriate device to establish a level of performance and expectations.

2 OBJECTIVES AND PERFORMANCE TARGETS

2.1 General objectives

For the description of the general (minimum) objectives of an academic Master's programme, the assessment panel takes as its basis the five Dublin descriptors, specifically (1) knowledge and understanding, (2) application of knowledge and understanding, (3) judgement forming, (4) communication and (5) learning skills.

The masters student having graduated:

- 1 is able to think and act in an autonomous and scientific matter; has acquired advanced understanding of academic and technical-methodological knowledge related to the field of urban studies; is able to integrate knowledge from various disciplines and handle complex material.
- 2 has developed creative and practical skills to apply this knowledge and understandings in a broad range of urban situations and problems, both in terms of analysis and interventions;

- 3 is able to form judgements based on incomplete or limited information, taking into account cultural, social and ethical responsibilities, which are linked to the application of his/her own knowledge and judgements.
- 4 is able clearly and unambiguously to communicate conclusions, as well as the underlying knowledge, rationale and considerations, to an audience of specialists and non-specialists, including to members of the research team and the outside world.
- 5 possess the learning skills enabling him or her to undertake further study that is largely self-directed or autonomous; has developed the social and managerial skills to work in multi-cultural, multilingual and multi-disciplinary environments.

2.2 Discipline-specific requirements, performance targets for master's study programmes in Urban Studies

2.2.1 An interdisciplinary curriculum in all relevant Urban Studies related disciplines

Urban Studies is typically a highly interdisciplinary area of research and learning. Study programmes in this area should comprise at least four relevant disciplines that are of particular interest for the scope of an Urban Studies programme (e.g. urban sociology, urban geography, urban planning, urban design and urbanism, history, urban anthropology, urban economics, cultural studies, urban politics, demography, social policy, urban history). Ideally, these disciplines would inhabit at least two broad domains, including social sciences, humanities, arts and design, professional practice fields and technical fields. The programme thus critically involves the development of a solid understanding of at least four of these relevant disciplines, their analytical foci and preferred methods. The student must be able to draw on different disciplinary bodies and domains of knowledge in analysing urban problems and designing interventions. In addition students are to develop a good understanding of current developments and prominent research in the various related disciplines.

2.2.2 Combining analytical skills with an action orientation to address urban problems

Urban studies typically combines a focus on the development of fundamental knowledge about urban systems and their social and spatial dynamics with a more applied focus on actions and interventions that can improve the social and spatial functioning of cities. This combination of

analytical skills and skills to formulate and design actions and interventions derives from the different disciplines urban studies draws on and requires urban studies programmes to focus in particular on the movement from evidence based analysis to action. The latter requires a plurality of methods to make urban dynamics and problems sufficiently tangible for students. Such methods include (but are not limited to) field work, excursion, immersion, case study, community engagement processes, power and decision-making structure analysis, asset-mapping, strength/weakness assessments, project planning and execution.

2.2.3 Contextual specificity and internationally comparative perspective

Cities cannot be understood as isolated and self-standing socio-spatial entities, especially not in times of global urbanization. Cities are nodes in national and international city networks and are enmeshed in complex scalar hierarchies (regional, national, European, etc.). This requires urban studies programmes to pay attention both to the contextual specificity of particular cities as well as to how cities compare to one another. Urban studies programmes should train students how to analyse the specificity of a particular city, and how to compare cities within and across world regions, preferably with attention to non-Western cities. Students should understand the critiques of Western biases toward non-Western cities, and be mindful of the criteria they deploy to compare cities.

2.3 Educational and organisational aspects in relation to the objectives

- The objectives and attainment targets of the programme are based in part on statutory regulations, developments in social science and the discipline, the labour market for graduates, knowledge in relation to learning and teaching and relevant social developments.
- The choices made by the programme organisers are clear and explicitly laid down in the educational reference framework of the programme.
- The academic and professional orientation of the programme is clearly reflected in the objectives and attainment targets.
- The objectives and attainment targets guide the content and design of the teaching.
- The objectives and attainment targets are formulated both at the level of the programme and at the level of individual courses.
- Each course contributes in its own way to the achievement of the objectives of the programme as a whole.

- Teaching staff clearly understand the objectives and attainment targets of the programme.
- Students are made aware of the course objectives and intended learning outcomes and clearly understand the objectives of the programme.

3 PROGRAMME

The assessment panel believes that the programme should be configured in such a way that the objectives can be achieved. This means that the programme should have a suitable structure, that appropriate teaching methods should be used and that suitable evaluation methods should be applied to test the achievement of the objectives. The choices made by the programme organisers in this regard must be substantiated in the light of the envisaged objectives.

Urban Studies is an interdisciplinary and internationalized field of study. This must be reflected in the programme in the following ways:

- the programme includes at least four relevant disciplines within the broad range of Urban Studies and pays special attention to how knowledge and insights derived from them may be integrated;
- the programme combines teaching in empirical disciplines (analytical, interpretive, experimental) with teaching in normative disciplines (applied, action-oriented, design-focused);
- the programme pays sufficient attention to the internationally comparative analysis of cities, both in terms of theory, methods and empirical knowledge.

The programme organisers must offer guarantees for the scientific, societal and professional relevance of the course, and of the efficiency and efficacy of the programme. To this end, the programme must:

- meet the academic standards as determined by developments in the various disciplines of Urban Studies;
- consider the expectations of the professional labour market, with a clear plan for preparing students to engage that market;
- be aware of the available academic knowledge on learning and teaching that is needed for the design, implementation and evaluation of the teaching;
- take appropriate account of relevant societal developments (such as globalization, Europeanisation, growing social inequality and super-diversity) by which urban conditions are shaped.

With regard to *science and methodology*, this means that:

- the programme takes into account the state-of-the-art theories and developments in at least four disciplines within the field of Urban Studies. These are reflected in the content and structure of the teaching programme;
- the programme has a clear scientific character, i.e. is based on scientific norms, values, theories, methods, developments and applications;
- the programme devotes major attention to the development of discipline-specific theory and methodology, based on a thorough study of the concepts in academic research, and supported by the relevant research methods, but also pays explicit attention to the different ways of combining them in a truly interdisciplinary fashion;
- the programme allows students to participate in urban studies research activities that are on-going in the institutions involved in the studies programme and draws on in-house research when relevant.

With regard to the *professional field and the labour market*, this means inter alia that:

- the programme builds contacts with the professional field;
- the knowledge of and experience with the professional field is translated where possible and useful into a teaching practice, for example through guest lectures, and field trips;
- the programme evidences a strong professional development plan so that students graduate as confident, autonomous, and effective professionals;
- the programme pursues an active alumni policy.

With regard to *educational and teaching knowledge*, this means inter alia that:

- the programme has an explicit view of learning and teaching (laid down in the educational reference framework), which refers to scientifically accepted educational insights;
- teaching staff understand and support the programme's approach to learning and teaching;
- the programme allows regular and consistent opportunities for students to engage in face-to-face interaction with staff;
- the educational reference framework forms part of the basis for the configuration of the programme;
- the internal work and consultation structure (e.g. between lecturers from different disciplines and partner institutions) is geared to the necessary steering and coordination of the programme.

With regard to *relevant societal developments*, this means inter alia that:

- the programme keeps track of contemporary developments in cities in Europe and beyond and integrates them into the curriculum;
- students are triggered to critically engage with contemporary debates on cities, their socio-cultural formation, development and dynamics;
- the programme reflects a clear and explicit vision about the internationalisation of the programme.

Practicability, study progress and workload

- The programme, including the optional courses, has sufficient horizontal and vertical coherence.
- Teaching staff and students evidence a clear understanding of the curriculum, progress of study toward completion, and workload;
- The organisation of the programme should foster its practicability;
- The vision of learning and teaching should be specifically translated into practical features which are operationalised in the organisation of the programme;
- It should be possible for an average student to complete the programme in the specified time period, and the programme should encourage efficient use of time;
- The programme organisers systematically monitor the workload and make adjustments where necessary;
- The programme organisers pursue an active policy in relation to study progress.
- Regular opportunities are provided for student feedback and evaluation.

Intake and admission requirements

- The programme states clearly what initial level is required of students and what the criteria and procedures are that are used to assess applications;
- If necessary, the admission requirements should be tested (e.g. knowledge of the English language);
- The programme allows for deficiencies in the knowledge and skills of intake students to be remedied.

Presence of factors which foster and/or impede study

Factors which impede study are identified and adequate remedies are developed:

- The programme provides a system of study guidance and tutoring which is aimed at the prevention and early identification of study difficulties and at making suggestions for and implementing solutions;
- Student tutoring is geared from the start to helping them learn to work independently;
- Students with learning or other disabilities receive understanding and guidance to ensure that their disability has the minimum possible impact on their chance of success.

Where necessary, measures are taken, monitored and adjusted to foster study.

- The programme organisers take suitable measures to improve the results and progress of students.

Teaching methods

- The student learning process is the central focus and is the starting point for the design and configuration of the teaching programme;
- The view of and goals for learning are specifically translated into the teaching approaches and methods regarded as necessary for the programme;
- The programme offers a wide diversity of pedagogical approaches and methods aimed at stimulating the development of knowledge, skills and analytical thinking;
- Varied use is made of adapted teaching methods and efficient support of those methods using relevant technologies (e.g. electronic learning platform);
- The learning process is supported by adequate teaching tools and appropriate teaching and learning resources which are sufficiently accessible for students;
- The practical form of the teaching methods is stimulating and motivating;
- The programme dedicates significant time to self-study and working independently and less lecturer-dependent teaching methods;
- The teaching methods used encompass amongst others group work, project-based work, excursions and field work.

Assessment and testing

The learning and teaching vision is translated into the form and content of the evaluation, including evaluation of presence and participation in class.

- The examination requirements and form are made clear to students in advance.
- Assessment takes place on the basis of predetermined assessment criteria.
- Efforts are made to achieve optimum timing of the evaluation activities during examination periods.
- Students receive feedback on their test results for all forms of evaluation (permanent evaluation (e.g. class participation, assignments and papers) as well as for examinations) and this for all course components.
- The programme has an explicit policy on academic honesty, which, among other aspects, informs students about the meaning and consequences of plagiarism. Students are informed about this policy in various venues (orientation, guideline documents, syllabi, etc.).

Instrumental requirements for the Master's thesis

- The Master's thesis is an individual demonstration of ability and marks the culmination of the programme. If the Master's thesis is a group project, methods must be available to assess the individual student.
- The programme is structured in such a way that the students are guided by the staff, regularly given feedback on their dissertation progress and can prepare adequately for the Master's thesis.
- The Master's thesis and accompanying modules account for a least one fifth of the total number of credits, with a minimum of 15 and a maximum of 30 credits.
- The assessment criteria for the Master's thesis are laid down clearly and explicitly and are communicated in advance.
- Students must refer to the sources they have used in a correct and honest way.

Internationalisation

- There are structural links between the programme and other (foreign) universities.
- The programme encourages internationalisation and mobility between universities, both within and outside Europe.
- Initiatives are taken to build in an international dimension and comparative perspective into the teaching, including for those who do not travel abroad.

- The quality of courses followed in Western and non Western institutions is monitored.
- As far as possible, the curriculum structure and organisational parameters of the programme foster student mobility.
- There must be attention for and an orientation towards the presentation of projects and assignments in a relevant foreign language (e.g. English or French).

4 CONTRIBUTIONS TO KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE

Demonstration of the programme's shared intellectual frameworks

- The programme should articulate and clarify the intellectual commitments that link it to the broader project of Urban Studies in Europe. The programme should assure students that it offers an educative experience that is part of a larger intellectual enterprise, and that it provides credible preparation for access to international conversations in Urban Studies.

Demonstration of the programme's unique approaches

- In order to produce new understandings and practices in Urban Studies, Master's programmes must develop distinct and unique approaches to teaching, learning, and research. These distinctions allow for experimentation, growth, and advancement. The 4 Cities programme should articulate those features that distinguish it from peer programmes, and establish a case for why students might want to attend 4 Cities over the many other options available.

Value of Masters theses in the development of new knowledge and practice

- While the Master's thesis is an individual demonstration of ability, it must also prepare students to contribute to the broader fund of knowledge of Urban Studies.
- The Master's thesis project entails a certain amount of specialisation and is a clear culmination of the study. In it the student must demonstrate that he/she has acquired the necessary understanding, knowledge and skills, has developed the ability to integrate knowledge and methods from various disciplinary backgrounds and can combine analytical skills with skills to formulate and/or design actions and interventions.

- In the Master’s thesis, students demonstrate that they are able to process the relevant literature adequately and that they are able to analyse, address and tackle a research problem in a creative and scientifically sound way, and are able to report the results in a clear way, both verbally and in writing.
- The programme should establish criteria and processes by which it assesses not only the quality of individual Master’s theses, but the quality of aggregate, cumulative contributions of theses to the field of Urban Studies.
- Completed Master’s theses (or some portion thereof) should be readily available to the general fund of scholarship in Urban Studies.

Integration of research and professional habits into teaching and mentoring

- Although this is not a Ph.D. programme, it is nevertheless crucial that teaching staff demonstrate ongoing depth and breadth of research and scholarly accomplishment. Moreover, teaching staff should provide evidence of the integration of their research (whether in form, method, or content) into the teaching and learning mission of the programme.
- Teaching staff should demonstrate ongoing professional activity. Where appropriate, students should be encouraged and supported to participate in professional activities.
- Constant efforts are made to establish a clear link between teaching and research when awarding teaching assignments.
- The international focus of the programme means that staff are expected to develop international contacts with feedback into their teaching and/or research through participation in international networks and collaborative initiatives.
- The programme should develop a clear mentoring process both for students by teaching staff, and for junior faculty members by senior faculty members.

5 STAFF

Quality requirements for teaching staff

- The quality requirements for teaching staff relate among other things to:
 - their academic research expertise
 - their academic teaching expertise (including their holding a Ph.D.)
 - their familiarity with and, if relevant, experience of the professional field.

- Professionals can be attracted to teach in the programme as guest professors. They need to hold a Ph.D. or a terminal professional degree, or have an equivalent sound academic background.
- Efforts are made to establish links between teaching and research when awarding teaching assignments.
- The international focus of the programme means that staff are expected to develop international contacts with feedback into their teaching and/or research through participation in international networks and collaborative initiatives.
- Staff develop an academic curriculum and play an active part in academic research.
- The study programme is solidly based in the competences of a ‘core faculty’, indicating that all staff is closely involved in the study programme and that the subjects taught are part of the core business of at least one departmental research group or interdisciplinary centre.
- Quality of teaching should be routinely assessed through classroom observation, student feedback and evaluation, and examination of syllabi and other course materials. The programme should provide evidence that it integrates these assessments into improvements in the teaching and learning process.

Personnel policy (conducted from a teaching perspective)

- The procedure for staff recruitment and appointments is clearly described and can be consulted by everyone.
- Selection, evaluation and promotion of staff is, among others, based on the teaching qualities of the staff members and teaching needs of the programmes.
- The programme has an explicit professionalization policy with respect to academic teaching, and devotes resources toward this end.
- Staff are approachable and accessible.
- An active equal opportunities policy is pursued.

6 FACILITIES

Infrastructure

- Staff have access to adequate facilities (in terms of quantity and quality) and adequate accommodation to support the teaching process.
- Students have access to adequate resources (in terms of quantity and quality) and adequate accommodation to support the teaching and learning process.

- If international mobility is required from students as part of their study programme, sufficient information, time and support about the mobility, accommodation and access to the host universities' facilities is provided to students.

Study information and guidance

- Adequate information is made available to (potential) students.
- The university library buys an adequate supply of the core texts.
- Students are made aware in advance of the education and examination regulations, including the complaints procedure in the event of disputes.
- The programme has a policy aimed at detecting changes in the intake.
- Possibilities are built in to the teaching programme to enable deficiencies in prior knowledge and skills to be made good and/or to refer students to other institutions in these cases.
- The programme has a system of study guidance and tutoring and specific measures are taken to improve the results and progress of students.
- The programme communicates transparently about the full cost of the programme to (prospective) students, including those costs related to excursions, field work and international mobility, and also monitors the real cost of the programme.

7 INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

- The programme has a clearly described educational quality assurance system in place.
- The quality policy and system is focused on prevention (i.e. measures are taken to avoid the emergence of problems with the quality of education), control and improvement.
- It is clearly laid down who has what authority in the context of the quality assurance system.
- A clear structure is in place to support the quality assurance process.
- Quality monitoring is geared to the educational reference framework of the programme.
- Students must be involved in regular educational evaluations.
- The programme involves staff, students, alumni and representatives of the professional field in its quality assurance system.

- The programme monitors the content-related quality of the courses, with a specific focus on coherence and avoiding overlap between the different courses.
- The programme has a clear management structure that takes care of the daily management and the strategic positioning of the programme.

8 RESULTS

The programme monitors the achievement of its objectives and its progress. The following elements among others may be important here:

Achievement of the objectives

- The final level attained by graduates (including the level of the Master's thesis and the level of examinations).
- Structural contacts with the professional field and attention for the needs of the professional field.
- The programme operates an active alumni policy:
 - the programme keeps track of the employment profiles and sectors of its graduates;
 - the programme asks alumni at regular intervals about their experiences, findings and suggestions regarding (the curriculum of) the programme;
 - students are thoroughly prepared to enter the professional field (e.g. through information sessions and, where possible, opportunities for work experience);
 - the programme operates an active alumni policy, e.g. by encouraging the formation of an alumni association and/or supporting initiatives taken by the alumni association).

Study progress

- The programme operates an explicit policy on study progress.
- The programme performs (if necessary) a dropout analysis to ascertain why students give up the programme.
- Factors which impede study are identified and remedies worked out. Measures are taken which foster study; these are monitored and adjusted where necessary.

CHAPTER III

Table with scores, subjects and aspects

The following table represents the assessment scores of the assessment panel on the six subjects of the accreditation framework and the underlying aspects. The assessment panel has based the attribution of the assessment scores on the minimal requirements for Master's study programmes, as described in the Dublin descriptors and translated for the Flemish context in the 'Structuurdecreet van het Hoger Onderwijs (2003)' (Act on Higher Education) and the accreditation framework of the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands & Flanders (NVAO). Moreover, the assessment panel has formulated its reference frame (*Section 1, chapter II*), in which amongst others, the domain-specific requirements are expressed.

The assessment panel emphasises that an assessment score, attributed to a subject or an aspect, is a summary of a larger number of criteria and points of consideration. Every aspect thus includes a diversity of points of considerations that are considered in the assessment. These considerations are understandably pronounced better and more clearly in the report of the individual study programmes, compared to the table in this section. The assessment panel has attributed the assessment scores by making a weighted average of the assessments of these points of consideration.

The table and the scores assigned are therefore inextricably bound with the arguments described in the reports concerning the individual study programme and ought to be read and interpreted in connection to the text of the corresponding report. Any interpretation based solely on the scores

in the table, is unjust towards the study programme and passes over the assignment of this external assessment exercise.

Explanation of the scores of the aspects (quadruple scale):

| | | |
|-----------|-----------------------|---|
| E | Excellent | 'best practice', an (international) example |
| G | Good | the quality stands out above the generic quality |
| S | Satisfactory | fulfils the demands with respect to the generic quality |
| U | Unsatisfactory | does not fulfil the demands of the generic quality |
| NA | Not Applicable | |

Explanation of the scores of the subjects (binary scale):

- + **Satisfactory**
fulfils the demands with respect to the generic quality;
there is no scale to indicate further excellence

- **Unsatisfactory**
does not fulfil the demands of the generic quality

The aspect 2.4 'duration' is scored as 'OK', if the study programme fulfils the legal requirements with respect to the duration of the programme, expressed in ECTS-credits.

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN URBAN STUDIES (4CITIES) - VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT BRUSSEL

| | |
|---|----|
| Subject 1 Objectives of the study programme | + |
| Aspect 1.1 Level and orientation of the objectives of the programme | S |
| Aspect 1.2 Domain-specific requirements | E |
| Subject 2 Curriculum | + |
| Aspect 2.1 Relationship between aims and objectives and contents of the programme | S |
| Aspect 2.2 Requirements with regard to the professional and academic orientation of the programme | G |
| Aspect 2.3 Coherence of the programme | E |
| Aspect 2.4 Duration | OK |
| Aspect 2.5 Study load | G |
| Aspect 2.6 Coordination of structure and contents | G |
| Aspect 2.7 Assessment and examination | S |
| Aspect 2.8 Master's thesis | G |
| Aspect 2.9 Admission requirements | G |
| Subject 3 Deployment of staff | + |
| Aspect 3.1 Quality of staff | G |
| Aspect 3.2 Requirements of professional and academic orientation | E |
| Aspect 3.3 Quantity of staff | S |
| Subject 4 Facilities and provisions | + |
| Aspect 4.1 Material facilities | S |
| Aspect 4.2 Student support and guidance | G |
| Subject 5 Internal quality assurance | + |
| Aspect 5.1 Evaluation of results | S |
| Aspect 5.2 Measures to effect improvement | G |
| Aspect 5.3 Involvement of staff, students, alumni and the professional field | S |
| Subject 6 Results | + |
| Aspect 6.1 Level that has been achieved | G |
| Aspect 6.2 Results of teaching | G |
| Final decision of the assessment panel | + |

SECTION 2

Report of
the study programme

VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT BRUSSEL

The Master of Science in Urban Studies

PREFACE

In accordance with its mission, the assessment panel presents in this report its opinion on the six themes from the framework for accreditation and a global opinion, which will be the basis for the NVAO to accredit the study programme. In addition, the assessment panel makes recommendations for the further improvement of the quality of the education delivered by the study programme.

The Vrije Universiteit Brussel (hereafter shortened to 'VUB') offers the two years initial Master's programme the '*Master of Science in Urban Studies*' (shortened to '4Cities'). 4Cities is jointly organised by six European Universities: Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), Universität Wien, Københavns Universitet, Universidad Complutense de Madrid en de Universidad Autónoma de Madrid and is supported by the associated partner the UNICA network. The programme is a UNICA Euro-master in Urban Studies, indicating that the programme is organised by universities in capital cities of Europe.

The 4Cities master was founded in 2004, when 4 universities from 4 capital cities accepted the challenge to organise a European Master in Urban Studies. In the process, two additional capital universities joined the project and a few years later, the programme was also supported by the Hungarian Academy of Science in Budapest. The 4Cities programme was

launched in 2008 as a two year initial master's programme. The VUB in Brussels coordinates this international programme. The management of the programme is undertaken by the six programme coordinators at the contributing universities.

In September 2012, a few days before the visit of the assessment panel to the programme, the 4Cities programme management received a positive response to the application for Erasmus Mundus funding. Consequently, from 2013 onwards until 2018, 4Cities will run as an Erasmus Mundus programme.

The assessment panel visited 4Cities at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel from 26th till 27th September 2012. It has formed its judgement about the programme based on the self-evaluation report, the conversations and interviews with the Faculty Board and directors, the co-ordinators from all contributing universities, the international teaching staff, students and alumni of the programme, the staff responsible for the study counselling and internal quality assurance, the documentation of the programme, the additional information requested during the assessment site visit, the study and evaluation material and the Master's theses. The assessment panel visited the facilities at the VUB site during its assessment site visit to the institution. The assessment panel did not visit the other locations, but received ample information about the programme and the facilities at the 5 other institutions (e.g. presentations of the different facilities and locations, conversations with the students via the Internet).

The evaluation for each individual aspect relates to the six locations of the 4 Cities programme, unless stated differently.

THEME 1 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The 4Cities programme is co-organised by six different universities at four locations:

- the first semester (Brussels 40 ECTS–30 ECTS from 2013–2014 onwards): *at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel*, at the Department of Geography at the Faculty of Science and *at de Université Libre de Bruxelles*, at the Department ‘Institut de Gestion de l’environnement d’Aménagement du Territoire’ (IGEAT) at the Faculty of Sciences and at the Department of Social and Labour Sciences at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences;
- the second semester (Vienna– 20 ECTS): *at the Universität Wien*, at the Department of Geography and Regional Research, at the Faculty of Earth Sciences, Geography and Astronomy;
- the third semester (Copenhagen – 20 ECTS): *at the KØbenhavns Univer-site*, at the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies at the Faculty of Humanities;
- the fourth semester (Madrid 10 ECTS–20 ECTS from 2013–2014 onwards): *at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid*, at the Department of Geography at the Faculty of Literature and Philosophy *and at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid*, at the Department of Sociology at the Faculty of Political Science and Sociology.

The self-evaluation report describes the focus of the 4Cities programme:

- “The programme focuses on:
 - **Glocalization:** the processes of globalization and localization – as a general context leading to a renewed importance of the city and urbanity in the 21st century. The city is considered a nodal point in post-national developments.
 - **Europe as the unit of analysis:** Europe and the European unification process are seen as part of, and a reaction to, this globalization process. Our scope is Europe seen through its cities and urban networks.
 - **Interdisciplinarity and internationality** as an added value. The UNICA master is a thematic master’s programme focused on trans disciplinary approaches and trans disciplinary practices (not least bridging urban planning and urban sociology, geography, literature, architecture, etc.) with a focus on the socio-spatial analysis of cities.
 - **An education built on strong cases:** Brussels (capital of the EU, small global city) – Copenhagen (the Scandinavian mode of regulation), Vienna (metropolis at the centre of Europe: gateway to the East), Madrid (the Mediterranean cities) and a number of surrounding cities including Budapest as a former Soviet country.

- **The importance of fieldwork:** research experience in each city and comparative or transnational research as the basis for a final Master thesis.
- **A number of excursions and visits:** a central attractor is that we incorporate well prepared excursions in each block. Each excursion incorporates a socio-spatial introduction to the city (a city walk) and an institutional visit with a focus on certain aspects of policy or management. Moreover a number of projects and institutions will be visited.”

The self-evaluation report describes the intended objectives for the 4Cities programme:

1 Students think and act in an autonomous and scientific manner on urban planning and sustainable urban development in an interdisciplinary way (skill-based):

Students master general scientific competences. This means that students are able to conduct rigorous research in urban society, space and forms in an academic considered way. Students are able to set up a research design involving an original research question, to conduct the research, draw conclusions and (if required) formulate proposals or solutions. Master students in Urban Studies assemble the learning skills to allow them to continue to study or to carry out research in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous.

2 Students have an advanced insight into and understanding of academic and technical or methodological knowledge related to urban studies from an interdisciplinary point of view (knowledge-based):

The master student in Urban Studies can reproduce, demonstrate, define or indicate knowledge and understanding of urban theories in different disciplines such as socio-political approaches to the city, spatial approaches to the city, planning, urbanism and architecture, literature in the city, sustainability in the city and methodological tools in urban studies. This also includes project and design oriented knowledge coming from academic disciplines (planning, urban renewal planning etc.) and practical exercise (fieldwork). The theory is discussed during lectures and worked on in readings and essay writing and it is also implemented via several case studies (based on the four cities students are staying in and on multiple excursions). In this way students strengthen their ability to tackle a broad spectrum of urban issues.

The scientific knowledge mainly takes into account the following fields:

- The bases of urban theories in different disciplines.
- The city as a social product: factors, global context (globalization, Europe, Fordism/post-Fordism, modernism/post modernism etc.).
- The local context and heritage.
- Planning and design processes and systems, and project management.
- Understanding the main urban process in growing and decline in relation to the principal functions composing the urban space.
- Knowledge of scientific research methods and scientific reporting.
- Practical and daily knowledge on cities, urban policy and planning, and on urban cultural institutions and projects.
- Knowledge on national and regional differences, their nature and their consequences.
- Knowledge of the social and spatial developments in Europe.
- Follow-up of the progress and new debates within academia regarding their field of study in a fast, critical and independent way, and this in various academic disciplines.

3 Students construct practical skills to apply this knowledge and understanding in urban situations and problems (skill-based): This means that the students interpret the knowledge acquired and use it in their argumentation and conclusions demonstrating that they have gained insight into the knowledge of urban studies.

Students can deal with complex problems and translate their reflections into adequate application and problem solving. This provides a basis or an opportunity for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research project. In the professional field the graduates can propose solutions or elaborate proposals for urban problems and design alternatives through planning, project management and scenario research. For this purpose, certain kinds of didactical courses have been developed.

4 Students show creative, interdisciplinary skills, both obtained from theory and practice (skill based):

It is an important objective that students gain from experimenting with the simulation of project development, using planning techniques (structure, master plan) and 'creative techniques' (beyond scenario technique), and from visiting best practices and carrying out many excursions in different environments.

- 5 Students make judgements with a critical mind and open attitude (attitude-based):**
After two years of study students can demonstrate the ability to formulate judgements with incomplete information. This also includes reflecting on social and ethical responsibilities linked to the application of their knowledge and judgements. Students can argue rationally and draw independent conclusions based on a rigorous, analytical and critical approach to data.
- 6 Students develop the skills to communicate clearly and unambiguously their conclusions and the underpinning knowledge and rationale to specialist and non-specialist audiences (skill-based):**
To develop this skill some didactical tools are implemented to train students in this important part of the master. Students have the ability to communicate clearly in speech, writing and other appropriate modes of expression and presentation.
- 7 Students develop social skills, managerial skills** such as working in multi-cultural, multilingual and interdisciplinary surroundings, working in groups with members of different cultural and professional backgrounds (skill and attitude based).

Aspect 1.1 Level and orientation of the objectives of the programme

The assessment panel assesses the 'level and orientation of the objectives' of the Master of Science in Urban Studies as satisfactory.

The assessment panel finds that the aims and objectives of 4Cities touch upon the key elements of the multidisciplinary area of urban studies and evaluates these as good with respect to the development of general competences and of general academic-oriented competences at an advanced level. The aims and objectives adequately aim at the instillation of an advanced understanding of urban studies in its various aspects. The programme's objectives adequately attend to the development of academic skills, to recent developments in the discipline, and to the processes by which new theories are formed. However, more attention should be paid to competence-oriented learning in the aims and objectives. In this respect, the assessment panel expects the intended competencies to be explicitly stated in the aims and objectives. It must be made clear in the precise description of the objectives how the programme realizes the integration of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Furthermore a competence matrix can

provide the evidence that all the programme competencies are covered by the whole of the courses.

The programme is by its nature truly international, having its students live and study in four different cities in four different countries and therefore lives up to the expectations of what is commonly understood as the true international dimension of a study programme. The Dean of the Faculty of Sciences at the VUB believes in the strength of the 4Cities programme as a flagship programme, one that raises awareness of the international study programmes in this university. The Dean is therefore convinced that adequate support by the Faculty of Sciences at the VUB is needed to run this programme. The other locations also value the 4Cities master as a truly international master programme and an example of how synergy can be found across discipline boundaries and sites to establish a strong international brand.

Aspect 1.2 Discipline-specific requirements

The assessment panel assesses the discipline-specific requirements of the Master of Science in Urban Studies as excellent.

During the interviews with the assessment panel, the programme directors reported that the main objective of the 4Cities master is to acquire a comprehensive and sound knowledge of European cities within different welfare state systems in a globalised world, underpinned by the combination of interdisciplinarity and internationality within the field of urban studies.

The assessment panel is impressed by the pioneering role taken up by the 4Cities programme in the bottom-up Europeanization of higher education, both in terms of the specific learning objectives of the 4Cities Urban Studies master and the ways in which they have jointly designed (and continue to do so) the programme and the learning experience. The assessment panel recognises that the joint organisation of the programme by the six contributing universities enhances its approach, when compared to other European Studies programmes. The panel further finds that the final qualifications are derived from the relevant academic disciplines and research fields and capture very well the essence of urban studies as a multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary field of research and practice. The programme successfully blends theoretical and practical courses, emphasises field trips and field work in all cities, builds strong critical and ana-

lytic capacities in students, and includes a strong comparative element that enhances understanding of cities within their specific socio-cultural, historical and political contexts. The discipline specific requirements of the urban studies master are hence successfully coupled with the mission to produce a new kind of truly international urban professionalism and to Europeanise higher education from the bottom-up through immersive teaching in four capital cities.

The assessment panel would like to encourage the 4Cities master to clarify and write down its mission more extensively along the lines presented by the programme directors to the assessment panel during the site visit. With an eye on the future and the upcoming retirement of the founding fathers of the programme, a more clearly and frequently articulated mission statement for the 4Cities programme would help to safeguard its viability for the future, clarify its objectives, and facilitate its communication to all current and future stakeholders.

The programme management team agreed with the assessment panel's frame of reference. The panel is of the opinion that there is good alignment in the aims and objectives of the 4Cities master with the requirements set by (international) peer groups as well as with the needs of the professional field. The assessment panel was convinced that the pronounced mission statement is successfully carried out by the management team and provides a clear context for the discipline related objectives of the programme.

General remarks about the objectives of the study programme

The assessment panel was informed that it is virtually impossible to comply with all regional or domestic legislation related requirements for an international study programme, which certainly is not in line with the philosophy of the European Higher Education Area, or with the spirit of the Bologna agreement.

The panel is of the opinion that it would be wise to put these concerns high on the priority list for the forthcoming talks about the European Higher Education Area and try to find ways to analyse the differences and similarities and then resolve the differences, in favour of one legislation. This would be similar for all the institutions involved and applicable to all European countries thus providing one common framework for the external quality control of international programmes. One idea worth considering would be to have international programmes evaluated by

a quality assurance agency, operating at the European level, evaluating all elements of the programme of the contributing partners at one time leading to one European accreditation decision, recognised and accepted by the local, national accreditation bodies. The assessment panel appreciates the efforts of the VUB programme director to continuously strive for this and hopes that this reasonable request will be addressed in the near future.

General conclusion related to theme 1: Aims and objectives

Since the aspects 'level and orientation' of the Master of Science in Urban Studies is scored as satisfactory and 'the discipline-specific requirements' of the Master of Science in Urban Studies is scored as excellent, the assessment panel assesses 'the objectives of the Master of Science in Urban Studies' positively.

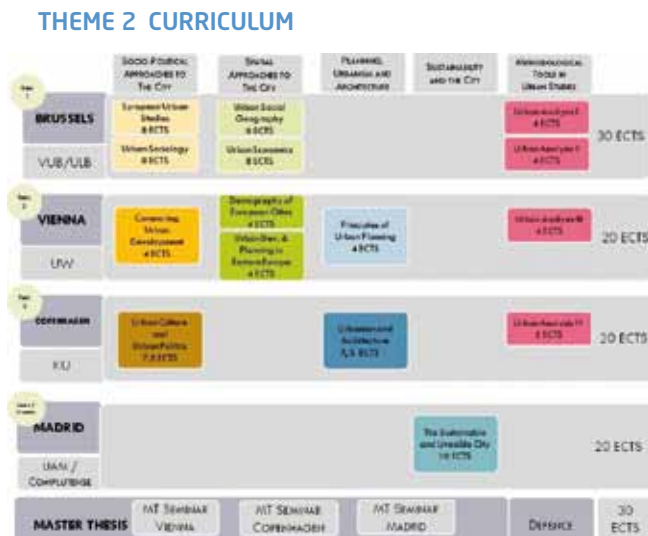


Fig. 1: schematic overview of the curriculum of the 4Cities programme

Figure 1 shows the main teaching topics, which are in line with the general objectives for the course and with the needs of the field of urban studies. According to the 'European smart growth strategy 'Europe 2020', the following aspects are included in the curriculum:

- inclusion and governance within the module “Socio-Political Approaches to the City”;
- smart growth within the module “Spatial Approaches to the City”;
- sustainable urban planning and architecture within the module “Planning, Urbanism and Architecture”;
- ecological sustainability and the concepts of green and zero-emission cities within the module “Sustainability and the City”.

The units are complemented by the module ‘*Methodological Tools in Urban Studies*’ and the Master’s thesis, which is an individual empirical research project.

Aspect 2.1 Correspondence between the aims and objectives and the curriculum

The assessment panel assesses the ‘correspondence between the aims and objectives and the curriculum’ of the Master of Science in Urban Studies as satisfactory.

The 4Cities programme adequately materialises the aims and objectives, both with respect to the level and orientation and with respect to the discipline-specific requirements. The subjects covered in the curriculum introduce students to a broad spectrum of approaches to urban studies. The programme addresses the content knowledge, competences and skills required for independent application of general and discipline-specific knowledge in new contexts. The course components are all explicitly designed for this programme. The programme gives students good opportunities to obtain the final qualifications and it creates adequate conditions for its graduates to enter the professional field. The students perceive the materials in their programme as up to date and relevant and covering all necessary aspects of the discipline of urban studies.

Moreover, the four participating cities provide a sound basis for comparative analysis and experience. Each city embodies a particular urban context and is exemplary with respect to a distinct aspect of urban studies. Brussels is the capital of Europe and a highly diverse and multicultural metropolis. Copenhagen demonstrates the Scandinavian approach to the welfare state and its varied provisions. Vienna has a rich historical background in urbanism and is a crucial gateway to Central and Eastern Europe. Madrid, being one of the biggest cities in Europe, presents tremendous variety and complexity with respect to urbanism, migration, expansion and development. Consequently, the cities provide very good case study environments for the students to experience

as they consider the disciplines, aspects, and themes that are addressed during their stay in each location. Typically, the students explore not only the capital city, but also the surrounding regions as well as other cities nearby (in total about 12 to 15 cities are visited throughout the two years), all adding to the students' development of a broad and rich perspective on issues in urban studies from a multiplicity of perspectives and disciplines. Moreover the cooperation with the Hungarian Academy of Science in Budapest is very valuable as a gatekeeper to the students' exploration of Central and Eastern European urban systems.

4Cities – despite its short history – is highly responsive to suggestions for improvements and so far, it has addressed all the challenges as it has developed, except one. However, the translation of the final qualifications into clear learning targets (in terms of competences) for the course components, taught at the various institutions, still has to be done and needs to be written down (see aspect 1.1). The assessment panel is convinced that outlining the learning targets for the individual course components will be important for future programme evaluation and assessment, for conveying the curriculum and content requirements of the programme to the future lecturers, and for building a strong cohort of new directors.

Students and alumni would like more attention to be paid to management concepts and practical skills (for instance GIS and cartography) in the curriculum. The assessment panel further suggests that the programme gives the theme of urban politics, governance and policy-making more prominence in the curriculum. The staff responded that if possible (time-wise) they would like to introduce the theme of governance and participation models in the programme as this has been dropped and has not been replaced yet. In addition, students indicated an interest in (elective) internships, which they regard as an important introduction to the professional field. The assessment panel, as well as the Board, agrees with the students. But currently there is no room in the 120 ECTS curriculum, no time during the programme or financial resources to support the introduction of these elements in the 4Cities curriculum. Nonetheless, students are free in January, February and March, before entering the fourth semester in Madrid and some use this time to do a voluntary internship. The programme management supports this initiative and helps the students in finding interesting internships, but currently there is no possibility to offer credits for these initiatives.

Aspect 2.2 Requirements for professional and academic orientation of the programme

The assessment panel assesses the requirements with regard to the professional and academic orientation of the Master of Science in Urban Studies as good.

After studying the self-evaluation report and following its discussions with the academic staff, students and alumni, the assessment panel concludes that 4Cities adequately emphasises knowledge development. The programme directors keep up with current developments and integrate these new trends into the programme. In addition, the programme pays strong attention to experience in the professional field. It also has strong links with professional practice through the multitude of (fieldwork) assignments and projects the students undertake in the four cities throughout the programme.

The 4Cities programme pays good attention to the development of research skills and research attitudes. Students learn to address problems and issues from a multitude of perspectives and develop multi- and interdisciplinary research skills in a wide range of areas. In practice, students tend to fall back on the methodologies of their prior discipline to conduct research for their Master's theses. This is not surprising given the difficulties of covering a wide range of research methodologies within the time constraints of the curriculum. However, the assessment panel encourages the 4Cities programme to continue its emphasis on the integration of methods and perspectives across disciplines. Students write several papers, prior to writing the Master's thesis, which fosters the development of their analytical and writing skills.

Aspect 2.3 Coherence of the programme

The assessment panel assesses the coherence of The Master of Science in Urban Studies as excellent.

The 4Cities programme provides a thoroughly coherent, logical, and rigorous path of study. All courses contribute to the examination of various aspects of urban studies, neatly distributed over the four semesters, with a gradual built-in evolution from the more introductory analytical module (in Brussels and the introduction of different models) towards more project-oriented inter-disciplinary modules in the following semesters of the programme. Each semester in itself offers a coherent section of course components, comprising a mix of ex-cathedra lectures, fieldwork and ex-

cursions. At the same time, each semester builds on the previous semester, creating a developmental arc toward higher learning that culminates in the Master's thesis. At the end of each semester, an assessment is organised. The Master's thesis is supervised throughout the two years, through different seminars and feedback moments in the various semesters.

Aspect 2.4 Duration of the programme

The Master of Science in Urban Studies is a two years, 120 study credits (ECTS-credits) study programme. The assessment panel therefore assesses the duration of this programme as being in line with the formal regulations described in the Act on the Restructuring of Flemish Higher Education.

Aspect 2.5 Workload

The assessment panel assesses the 'workload' of the Master of Science in Urban Studies as good.

The students from the 4Cities programme commented during the interviews that the workload is substantial but feasible. They describe the programme as intensive. Moreover, in each of the sequent locations, they are busy exploring and experiencing the city every moment of the day, and not only during office hours, which makes this an immersive programme. The workload is not perfectly evenly spread over the four semesters, due to deadlines for assignments, but students know beforehand when to hand in assignments and when workload peaks occur (near to examinations, for example). Imbalances in the past have been addressed adequately and adjustments were debated before having been implemented. Students commented that the workload for any particular course also depends on the background of the student: a bachelor in Sociology is likely to spend less time on related subjects than a student without relevant prior knowledge.

The assessment panel investigated the link between the estimated and actual study time and discussed this issue during the interviews with the parties involved. It found that most information about the study time is qualitative in nature and is not measured by means of standard procedures, applicable to measuring workload. The assessment panel is of the opinion that more formal workload measurement instruments should be introduced to monitor the workload in a more consistent manner over the years.

Aspect 2.6 Coordination of structure and contents

The assessment panel assesses the coordination of the structure and contents of the Master of Science in Urban Studies as good.

The 4Cities programme applies a strong methodological concept towards studying various aspects of cities, by having them live in the cities they examine through scholarship. Being there and 'living the city', in contrast merely to reading and hearing about it, constitutes a signature asset of the 4Cities programme, in the view of the assessment panel. In addition, students not only study the cities, but they also explore the surrounding areas, which helps them to put all elements in perspective.

The 4 Cities programme uses a good variety of learning activities in each semester: formal teaching (ex-cathedra lectures), exploration of topics (collective reading seminars), completion of scholarly papers, practical tutorials focusing on research methods or specific topics, group assignments for field work with oral and written presentations of the results, master's thesis seminars and presentations, guest-lectures and symposia, excursions to various cities and visits to organisations and institutions. The students who were interviewed asked for more interactive teaching approaches, more discussions and seminars as well as more attention to practical skills. The assessment panel is of the opinion that the majority of the teaching methods aligns with the didactic concept of the programme but suggests, in accordance with the students' request, the inclusion of more discussions and more interactive approaches at a level appropriate for interdisciplinary master's courses.

The assessment panel has examined the materials for the distinct courses, put at its disposal during the assessment site visit, and is of the opinion that these materials are of an overall good quality. Generally, a syllabus or reader of selected texts and materials is provided, keeping up with current developments in the fields comprising urban studies.

Each university uses its own online learning environment to support the courses, and students seem to cope with that as no remarks were made about having to use six different platforms.

Aspect 2.7 Assessment and examination

The assessment panel assesses the aspect 'assessment and examination' of the Master of Science in Urban Studies as satisfactory.

The assessment panel has examined a selection of examination questions (in the self-evaluation report and on display during the assessment site visit) and evaluates the examination questions as having an overall adequate quality, and that these fairly represent a cross-section of the subjects addressed in the distinct courses. The 4Cities master uses a good variety of test- and examination formats, consistent with the different evaluation traditions and the four different national systems and furthermore in line with the university policies. There is a good variation between open and closed book examinations, oral and written exams, in-class discussions, presentations and papers, all dependent on the nature of the courses and the learning objectives. The panel remarks that the written examination questions for the Brussels semester could be made more challenging.

There is no system in place (e.g. cross checking of examinations, external examiner) to guarantee the quality of the examinations. Lecturers make their own examination questions, in line with the objectives for the course component and with the examination format described in the ECTS files for the course component. Noteworthy is that each course at the individual institutions is accredited by its own national system, and therefore all examinations comply with the local examination regulations. The assessment panel is of the opinion that an external examiner or a mechanism to control the quality of the examinations for the 4Cities programme as a whole – given the different educational cultures throughout Europe – should be considered.

After each semester, before moving to the next city, students are examined on the course components they have studied. The marks are communicated by the end of the semester and students have the right to retake an examination in the next semester, in case of failure. The transparency of marking the examinations could be improved. Students have a right to ask for feedback but at some universities students need to be quite pro-active to obtain personal feedback about their examination results.

The students are informed well in advance (at the beginning of the academic year, and at the beginning of each new semester) about the university policies, the examination regulations and the nature of the examination formats. There is ample information about the examination systems in the various universities in the Student Handbook, given to the students at the beginning of each year.

Aspect 2.8 Master's thesis

The assessment panel assesses the aspect 'Master's thesis' of the Master of Science in Urban Studies as good.

The Master's thesis comprises 30 ECTS, which is in conformity with the regulations in the Act on the Restructuring of Higher Education in Flanders.

The self-evaluation report describes the crucial role played by the Master's thesis in the Master of Science in Urban Studies:

- The Master thesis plays a crucial role in the Master of Science in Urban studies because:
 - It tests the ability of the student to set up an academic research design involving an original research question, to conduct the research, to draw conclusions, to report the research findings in writing and be able to engage in a critical discussion with experts in the field of study as well as with a broader public (if applicable) to formulate policy proposals.
 - Students develop essential skills through the thesis work such as the ability to argue rationally and draw independent conclusions based on a rigorous, analytical and critical approach to data, demonstration and argument, as well as the ability to carry out scientific research.
 - Students develop attitudes such as being critical and self-reflective on their own thinking and work, being creative and problem solving oriented – Students acquire knowledge, not only on research methods and how to apply them in a scientific way, but more generally on the specific thesis topic.
 - Given the specific format of the thesis (*see next paragraph*) students explore the European dimension of their thesis topic by means of comparative research, and prove their capacity to deal with complexity such as e.g. regional and national differences.

- According to the self-evaluation report:
 - “The main aim of the Master’s thesis is that students develop skills to carry out scientific research in Urban Studies.
 - The expected outcome is a clear and scientifically argued research report (in English) which has the potential to be published in a scientific journal within the field of Urban Studies.
 - Students have to be able to present and defend their research and results in public. The written report and the public thesis defence are the two products that are valued and marked.
 - Through their thesis work students gather sufficient knowledge and skills to start working within the field of Urban Studies. A thesis which is judged to be of very good or excellent quality is a guarantee that the student is fit for an academic career as a researcher (possibly through a PhD programme).
 - The Master’s thesis has to be of scientific quality, meaning that a clear hypothesis has to be formulated referring to the literature, and that this hypothesis is checked through case studies in a scientifically correct and verifiable way.
 - A unique element in the programme is the demand for comparative analyses involving case studies located in different countries. This will enable the student to develop skills for comparative international research, and the ability to deal with complexity and diversity. It also enables students to take advantage of the different locations of the programme.”

The Master’s thesis guidance consists primarily of several workshops and seminars held each semester. Next to these initiatives, each student is assigned a supervisor for the Master’s thesis at the end of the second semester. During the seminars, students present their findings and report on their progress. The Master’s thesis is evaluated by the supervisor and a second reader (from different universities). The students defend their Master’s thesis in September in front of a jury, formed by professors of the 4Cities programme. The new cohort of students is present during the defence of the Master’s theses of the previous year and thus assists in this process when entering the programme.

The students commented that there is no one single approach towards supervision of the Master’s theses. Some students suggested introducing a more predefined format, outlining the rights and obligations of the student in this respect, as some experienced difficulties in receiving a response to their emails from their supervisor while residing in other countries throughout the year. The assessment panel is in favour of this suggestion.

The assessment panel has read and analysed all the currently available Master's theses of the programme (given its short history). The Master's theses provide adequate description of the subjects addressed and the research methods applied, and they adequately document the findings and provide a short reflection on their conclusions. The panel evaluates the academic level of the Master's theses as adequate. However, because most students tend to resort to the research methods they learned at the bachelor's or previous master's level, the assessment panel recommends that the 4Cities programme encourages each student to integrate more than one method, approach, or theoretical framework into the Master's theses.

Aspect 2.9 Admission requirements

The assessment panel assesses the admission requirements of the Master of Science in Urban Studies as good.

Students' application and the selection of potential students is centralised and managed by the 4Cities coordinators, but students can subscribe to the programme in one of the contributing universities.

The admission requirements for The Master of Science in Urban Studies (4Cities) are:

- having a 180 ECTS Bachelor (or equivalent) in geography, sociology, literature and cultural studies, architecture and planning, economy, political sciences, public management, tourism, history, criminology, leisure studies, media studies or a similar discipline.

Applicants who have another bachelor's degree can make a written request.

Students belonging to the EEA (European Economic Area) require no proof of language proficiency. For students not belonging to the EEA, proof of proficiency in English is compulsory.

The admission requirements comply with the university policies, regulations and institutional codes of practice on recruitment and admissions. The 4Cities programme aims at 25 students each year, 20 from the EEA, five from outside the EEA. The number of students enrolling in the first year of the 4Cities is on average (over the last 4 years) 20 students a year. The assessment panel is of the opinion that the number of students is favourable for the deployment of the programme's methodological concept,

given the immersive learning and its particular format of being a resident for several months in various cities throughout the programme.

The assessment panel wondered about the broad intake for the programme and discussed this issue with the programme management team. They commented that, as an urban studies master is more thematic than disciplinary, students having prior knowledge from various disciplines are free to apply. The assessment panel is of the opinion that the International Academic Board of the 4Cities programme has a good grasp and control over the intake process of the students and is aware of the differences in the prior knowledge of its students.

With respect to further improvement of the programme, the assessment panel suggests referring students – lacking some elements of the required and useful prior knowledge – to specialised preparatory courses, when entering the 4Cities programme.

General conclusion related to theme 2: Curriculum

Since the aspects that compose the theme ‘curriculum’ are scored at least as satisfactory for the Master of Science in Urban Studies, the assessment panel assesses the theme ‘curriculum’ of the Master of Science in Urban Studies positively.

THEME 3 STAFF

Aspect 3.1 Quality of staff

The assessment panel assesses the aspect ‘quality of staff’ of the Master of Science in Urban Studies as good.

The personnel policy for the 4Cities master is exercised by the local university regulations. At the VUB, positions for full-time teaching staff are published internationally. Candidates’ evaluations are based on their professional and educational qualities by an international selection panel. The selection panel’s opinion is submitted to the responsible bodies at the VUB, where the final decision is taken. The assessment and promotion of the academic staff are organised in accordance with the university procedures, amongst others, student evaluations about the teaching of the staff member. The teaching staff can follow educational

training sessions at the VUB. There are similar procedures in place at the other universities as well.

The 4Cities master is mainly taught by the academic staff from the departments contributing to the programme at the six universities. The panel describes their expertise as very good in all six universities. The professors are experts in their research field, lead renowned research groups, and are authorities in their respective domains. The teaching staff demonstrate good pedagogic knowledge and approaches, and the students appreciate the quality of their lecturing. In addition, also numerous experts from the field contribute to the programme as they are actively involved in field-work, excursions and site visits to various institutions and bodies in the various cities. Consequently, the assessment panel evaluates the overall quality of the teaching staff as good, with respect to their expertise in the disciplines taught, the educational approaches used and the didactic methods applied.

Aspect 3.2 Requirements for professional and academic orientation

The assessment panel assesses the requirements for professional and academic orientation of the staff of the Master of Science in Urban Studies as excellent.

The programme management team succeeds in attracting the right experts to teach in the programme and has the commitment from the six universities to staff the programme on a continual basis. The assessment panel observes a clear link between the disciplines taught and the research area of the experts holding key positions in the programme in the six contributing universities. The research expertise and academic record of the staff involved in teaching 4Cities is of a very good quality, demonstrated by the list of research outputs, relevant for the teaching in the programme. The staff demonstrates broad and active international research experience (e.g. publications and involvement in various international organisations within their domain of expertise). The research of the staff is introduced in the lectures, and the students appreciate the teaching quality.

Aspect 3.3 Quantity of staff

The assessment panel assesses aspect 'quantity of the staff' of the Master of Science in Urban Studies as satisfactory.

The teaching staff of the 4Cities Master comprises 14 full-time teaching staff at their university (6,58 FTE), 5 assistant staff members, and 0.5 administrative staff members. The distribution of the staff in age categories is fairly balanced, but six senior lecturers are near retirement. Given the relatively small size of the student body (on average 25 students), the student/ZAP ratio of 3.8 is favourable.

At the VUB, as the retirement of one of the founding fathers is near, two new tenure track professors in social geography are being hired and one is to take over the care for the 4Cities programme, along with other commitments in the Faculty of Sciences. The panel would like to encourage the newly hired professors to show strong commitment to, and enthusiasm for, this unique teaching programme and its continuity. Additionally, the assessment panel recommends attention to the formation of a new 'core faculty' for the 4Cities programme, as the next generation of lecturers prepares to take over the care for the programme. The assessment panel suggests that the responsibilities of the staff be explicitly indicated in their job descriptions and assessment frameworks in order to guarantee formal support of the institutions for the time-consuming participation in and management of the programme. The panel finds that the programme offers opportunities for advancement in teaching and research and connection to international networks and a wider academic community, but these may not always occur on the short term.

The assessment panel hopes that the new status of the Erasmus Mundus recognition of the programme would allow some more financial support for the management of the programme as well.

General conclusion related to theme 3: Staff

As the three aspects that comprise the theme 'staff' for the Master of Science in Urban Studies are evaluated at least as satisfactory, the assessment panel has a positive opinion about the theme staff for the Master of Science in Urban Studies.

THEME 4 SERVICES

Aspect 4.1 Facilities

The assessment panel assesses the aspect 'facilities' for the Master of Science in Urban Studies as satisfactory.

Based on the information in the self-evaluation report, the presentation held during the site visit about the accommodations at the various locations and the interviews with all parties involved, the assessment panel is of the opinion that the facilities for the 4Cities programme have an overall good quality. At the various locations, students use the lecturing rooms, the breakout rooms and private working space at the universities. In some universities they have 24-hour access to the facilities.

All universities associated with the programme dispose of good library facilities that are adequately equipped with reference materials (both in printed and in electronic forms, e.g. online databases), self-study facilities and working spaces for group work. Once registered in a certain library, electronic access is available for the remainder of the programme. All students have their own laptop and have access to the local university networks. The VUB and ULB across the street from one another, share the same campus wide WIFI, accessible to students. The facilities at all locations are amply equipped with modern techniques to foster effective learning. Given these considerations, the assessment panel is of the opinion that the material facilities at the six universities contributing to 4Cities are fine, and in agreement with what is expected from the contributing universities.

The teaching staff can easily be reached during the students' stay at a certain location because of the favourable student-staff ratio and the open-door attitude. The other professors teaching in the programme are fairly reachable through e-mail throughout the year.

At the beginning of the programme, at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, the programme director and the International Relations and Mobility Office (IRMO) central VUB service look into VISA issues, housing and social security issues for the students. During the preceding semester, the programme coordinator in the next city engages in informing students about practical things about the programme and the students' stay in their city. In Brussels, the students are referred to the private rental

market (e.g. Br(ik – ‘Brussel en ik’) and they are guided to find a place. In Vienna students can either stay at the student dormitories or seek private housing. In Copenhagen, students most often find private housing in the outskirts of the city. In Madrid, where students (up till now) only stay for two months, finding accommodation is a challenge. The staff from the departments at the various institutions are helpful and supportive in the students’ search for a place to live. The students commented during the interviews that the support in Madrid is less visible for the students, as the corresponding services are at the level of the faculty and there is less possibility for the students to address someone from the faculty when having practical questions.

The assessment panel was informed by both the students and the programme directors that VISA problems often occur for students entering the Schengen area. The assessment panel is supportive of the demand from the programme directors to address these issues at a higher administrative and legislative level, as currently some students only obtain a VISUM – although all paper work is done in time – after the first two months of teaching and consequently, miss part of the programme.

Aspect 4.2 Tutoring, student support and guidance

The assessment panel assesses the aspect ‘student counselling’ for the Master of Science in Urban Studies as good.

The provision of information is done through several channels: e.g. websites, promotional materials and personal contacts of the staff. On the 4Cities website (www.4Cities.eu) interested students find ample information and links to the participating universities, useful information on how to apply and about the curriculum. Flyers and promotional materials are distributed among different interested parties (colleagues, at educational fairs...). In addition much of the promotion of the programme is done by the staff members (at least one staff member is responsible for the information distribution about the programme in each contributing university) and the general information offered by the central university services.

The intake is monitored through an application procedure. Students fill out an application file to prove that they meet the entry requirements (including a motivation letter and three reference letters, providing the academic staff of the programme with qualitative information on the applicants).

At the start of the 4Cities master students are well informed about the objectives and about the four semester structure of the programme. In addition each semester, a welcome seminar is organised where students are informed in detail about the courses and the university services. The examination regulations are communicated to the students, amongst others in the Student Handbook.

Throughout the programme, staff members have almost daily contact with the students in a more informal manner. Students can also make appointments with the staff members or contact them by e-mail. Students are monitored and given feedback on their progress and performance by the staff throughout the programme. In addition, during each International Board Meeting the students' progress and possible problems are discussed and if necessary feedback is given to the student. Each of the universities has a centrally organised ombudsperson system. Students can use this facility but they tend to direct themselves to the local staff and secretariat in case of questions.

The assessment panel is of the opinion that the student support and guidance is very well organised, that the academic staff can indeed easily be reached and approached after the lectures and that the appropriate mechanisms for student counselling and guidance are operational at the six institutions.

The assessment panel however raises some concerns about the management structure for the 4Cities master. For the moment, (most of) the academic and logistics management of the 4Cities programme is done by the academic coordinator in Brussels. The students think very positive of their academic programme coordinator in Brussels and described her work as 'fantastic'. They further commented that in all cities there is someone nearby (except in Madrid), easily addressable for advice on practical things as well as directions towards the right services at the university or in the city. This is perceived as a valuable asset for getting acquainted with the new surroundings quite quickly. In this respect continuity and favourably a fixed appointment (not one that needs to be renegotiated every three months) for these staff members is absolutely vital to the success of the programme. Though rotation in principle is a good idea in order to more evenly spread the responsibility and the management workload over the different partners, there is a lot to be said for keeping the position and all the papers, files and other data in one place.

A second concern is that for the moment, the management (done by the academic coordinator) at VUB is almost exclusively situated at the level of the programme and the faculty and university level currently are only seldom involved, nor do these have a clear view on what could be done to support the management of the programme better. This is notably the case for the Career Service, which was not available to see the assessment panel during the site visit and failed to respond to the questions e-mailed by the panel to them shortly afterwards. Only after a repeated request from the assessment panel, an answer was received. Given the explicit aim of the 4Cities programme to produce a new type of urban professionals for the international labour market and pioneer a truly European and interdisciplinary teaching programme, the panel urges the Career Service and other supporting services at faculty and university level to take a stronger interest in this programme in order not to miss out on some valuable learning opportunities. Being involved in the management of the programme, could for instance help the university services derive a sound model, also applicable to other international programmes. Stronger involvement of the supporting services at faculty and university level could also help to reduce the heavy load on the shoulders of the staff in the programme.

The assessment panel remarks that, while high by European standards, the total effective cost of the programme is well communicated to the students. It further suggests that the 4Cities Board constantly monitors and updates the actual cost of the programme, with the goal of minimizing the substantial cost for the students.

General conclusion related to theme 4: Facilities

As the aspects that comprise the theme 'facilities and provisions' for the Master of Science in Urban Studies are evaluated at least as satisfactory, the assessment panel has a positive opinion about the facilities and provisions of the Master of Science in Urban Studies.

THEME 5 INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

Given the international nature of the 4Cities master, an additional internal quality assurance (IQA) system is implemented to allow for a quicker response, compared to the IQA methods applicable at university level in the various institutions.

The quality policy and 4Cities approach towards internal quality control have both a formal and an informal dimension. Formally, several quality control mechanisms are operational:

- *at the level of the individual university*, an evaluation is conducted at the end of *each semester*, using an (online) questionnaire or focus group interview regarding the course components, addressing educational manners as well as practical issues (e.g. housing, access to the facilities). The results are processed by the local team and reported to the Board. Measures for improvement are proposed if needed. Some contributing universities do not question the students after the semester in their city, but retrieve the relevant information from the alumni survey.
- *at the level of the entire programme*: the 4Cities Board meets after each semester of teaching. After graduation of a cohort of students, their alumni survey results are discussed. Remedial actions are decided upon as necessary. The local programme coordinators at the six universities, take up the daily management for running the programme at their institution.

In the future, if financially possible, an external examiner and external quality controller will be added to introduce a Quality Assurance Committee for the 4Cities programme.

At the informal level, students' views are taken into consideration on a regular basis. Due to the small size of the student groups as well as to the structure of the programme (including many excursions and visits) there are strong informal contacts between the students and the staff, providing the staff with instant feedback.

Aspect 5.1 Evaluation of the results

The assessment panel assesses the aspect ‘evaluation of the results’ of the Master of Science in Urban Studies as satisfactory.

The quality of the course components and of the programme as a whole is mainly guarded by the Board and by the programme coordinators at the various universities. Various instruments and initiatives are taken at the local universities or at the level of the Board. Good informal contact between the teaching staff and the students provides important input for the evaluation of the programme as a whole and the individual course components and semesters in particular. The assessment panel is of the opinion that satisfactory means are established to guard the quality of the programme, but that there is still room for improvement, most notably by also having the semesters in Madrid and Copenhagen be evaluated separately by the students. In addition, the panel is of the opinion that 4Cities could also profit from a real and balanced quality assurance policy for the entire programme as well as for its course components.

The self-evaluation report of the 4Cities master has a fairly good quality, providing consistent descriptions and evidence for the functioning of the programme and a brief critical weaknesses and strengths analysis at the level of the different subjects. The assessment panel remarks that the self-evaluation report has been written with an open mind and that the interviews were held in a very friendly and open atmosphere and provided the assessment panel with good additional insights and information to establish a clear opinion about the programme.

Aspect 5.2 Measures to effect improvement

The assessment panel assesses the aspect ‘measures to effect improvement’ of the Master of Science in Urban Studies as good.

The programme is monitored by the Board and consistently evaluated after each cohort of students has graduated, and in addition after some semesters. The assessment panel finds that not only the results of these formal evaluations, but also the incentives stemming from the informal feedback of the students and of the alumni survey, clearly result in discussed strategies for further improvement of the programme.

In 2008 the 4Cities master has been evaluated by an assessment panel to evaluate the newly organised programme, inaugurated by the NVAO, evaluated as a newly organised programme. The results from this evaluation have resulted in changes that have bearing to the entire programme. The assessment panel evaluates the follow-up of the recommendations, made by the previous external quality control exercises, as appropriate.

In addition, the 4Cities programme has also been evaluated or accredited by the domestic systems for external quality control in the various contributing universities.

Apart from external evaluations, the 4Cities programme is also highly responsive to comments and suggestions from its students and alumni and is geared towards constant improvement of its curriculum.

Aspect 5.3 Involvement of staff, students, alumni and the professional field

The assessment panel assesses the aspect 'involvement of staff, students, alumni and the professional field' of the Master of Science in Urban Studies as satisfactory.

The assessment panel is of the opinion that the involvement of the students is good, given the good formal structures that are in place (student representatives at the Board meetings) as well as the strong informal contacts, the evaluation of individual semesters of teaching (student representatives are involved in interpreting the students' remarks about the various course components) and the strong commitment of the staff (academic and administrative) to the 4Cities programme.

The informal contacts of the academic staff with the professional field function quite well through their (inter)national networks, but could be formalised with the eye on the future. Currently there is no real functioning alumni association for the 4Cities programme, but the alumni value such a structure to keep in touch with the programme. The assessment panel suggests that the programme directors should support the founding of one, given the value of such an organisation for both the (former) students and the programme and possibly also the Career Service. The assessment panel is further of the opinion that the alumni could be better heard in curriculum discussions as well.

General conclusion related to theme 5: Internal Quality Assurance

As the aspects that contribute to the theme 'internal quality assurance' are scored at least as satisfactory, the assessment panel has a positive opinion about the theme 'internal quality assurance' of the Master of Science in Urban Studies.

THEME 6 RESULTS

Aspect 6.1 Level that has been achieved

The assessment panel assesses the level that has been achieved by the Master of Science in Urban Studies as good.

The assessment panel finds that the aims and objectives of the 4Cities master are indeed realised and that the Master's theses have an overall good quality. The quality of the course components is good and students have good opportunities to attain the objectives of the programme and can graduate in the time foreseen.

The graduates are well prepared to enter the professional field. They find employment in a variety of sectors and engage in a wide range of occupations. The alumni, with whom the panel spoke all have jobs closely related to urban planning and social urbanism. The assessment panel noted that the alumni interviewees, while admittedly a non-random, self-selecting group, nevertheless demonstrated remarkable creativity, flexibility, and sense of purpose. The curriculum is generally perceived by the students as providing them with a comprehensive understanding of urban studies in all its aspects and the alumni commented during the interviews that the programme is very helpful for their career, as it contributes to their mastery of the related areas of research. The alumni all made particular reference to the usefulness of the networking opportunities gleaned through movement between four different cities across Europe.

Aspect 6.2 Study progress

The assessment panel assesses the aspect 'results of teaching' of the Master of Science in Urban Studies as good.

The majority of the students complete their study in the time foreseen and the dropout rate is very small. The 4Cities master currently has no stated retention and completion targets, but closely follows up on the results of teaching and reasons for dropout. The results indicate that the students benefit from the programme and – as is evident from the sectors of employment – obtain good positions in the professional field.

With respect to further improvement of the programme, the assessment panel suggests formulating real target figures, which could enforce managerial decisions to be taken in the future, when the programme might attract consistently higher numbers of interested students.

General conclusion related to theme 6: Results

Since the aspects contributing to the theme 'results' are scored as good for the Master of Science in Urban Studies, the assessment panel has a positive opinion about the results of the Master of Science in Urban Studies.

GENERAL OPINION OF THE ASSESSMENT PANEL

The Master of Science in Urban Studies

The assessment panel evaluates the Master of Science in Urban Studies as having good generic quality elements and expresses a positive final opinion since the different criteria of the six themes from the accreditation framework are satisfied.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER IMPROVEMENT OF THE PROGRAMME

Aims and objectives

- apply competence-oriented learning in the aims and objectives;
- formulate the aims and objectives in terms of learning outcomes;
- better describe the mission statement of the 4Cities programme.

Curriculum

- consider including a course on urban politics, governance and policy making;
- consider ways to introduce students to more practical skills;
- distribute student workload as evenly as possible over the semesters and time periods;
- apply a method to register and monitor the workload in a consistent manner;
- introduce more interactive teaching methods in every stage of the programme;
- introduce a formal process to control the quality of the examinations;
- improve the transparency of the marking of the examinations;
- organise proper feedback for each semester in a consistent and formal manner;
- decide on a system to address master's theses supervision in a consistent manner;
- direct students in selecting master's thesis subjects that can be addressed in a multi- and interdisciplinary manner;
- encourage students to extend their research skills and expertise through their choice of master thesis topic;
- refer students lacking crucial elements of prior knowledge to specialised preparatory courses.

Staff

- aim at increasing the number of the academic staff members associated with the programme;
- form a group of core faculty members to carry the programme into the future;
- clarify the commitment of the staff for the 4Cities programme.

Services

- better divide the workload for the management of the programme over the contributing universities;
- guarantee continuity for the daily practical management of the programme in the six universities;
- better support the management of the programme by the university support services;
- monitor and communicate the yearly updated estimate of the total cost for the programme;
- maintain the initiatives to control and minimize the effective cost of the programme for the students.

Internal quality assurance

- perform a programme wide evaluation of the programme, using an appropriate joint tool that supersedes (and is applicable to all) the local university policies with respect to internal quality assurance;
- increase formal involvement of all stakeholders (students, alumni and professional field) in curriculum discussions for the programme;
- help establish or accommodate a formal alumni association for the programme.

Results

- develop a policy with respect to retention and completion target figures for the programme.

APPENDIX 1

Curriculum vitae
of the members of
the assessment panel

Prof. dr. Stijn Oosterlynck is Assistant Professor at the department of Sociology of the University of Antwerp. He is teaching courses on urban sociology, social stratification and exclusion and urban social work. He is the spokesman of OASeS (Centre on Inequality, Poverty, Social Exclusion and the City) and heads the research line on urban development, governance and community building. He works among others on local development and social innovation in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods.

Prof. dr. Sophie Watson is professor of Sociology at the Open University in Milton Keynes, United Kingdom and one of the Directors of the ESRC Research Centre for Socio-Cultural Change. Sophie Watson previously held professorial positions at the University of East London, the University of Bristol and the University of Sydney. She had several research and visiting fellowships at the University of New South Wales, the University of Sydney, the Australian National University (Canberra) and the LSE in London. Sophie Watson has taught courses in cultural studies, urban studies and urban theory, sociology, social policy, society and space, feminist theory, critical theory, research methods, comparative social policy, urban and social geography, housing, urban and regional planning. Her current research interests are on Public Space and Everyday Street Objects; cities and the cultures of water, religion, culture and materiality and new religious cultural practices, identities and spaces. She has recently edited (with Gary Bridge) Blackwell's *New Companion to the City*. Her expertise relates in her later research also more to urban governance, culture and citizenship.

Prof. dr. Joseph Heathcott is Associate Professor of Urban Studies and Associate Dean for Academic Initiatives in the School for Public Engagement at The New School. During the 2010-2011 academic year he served as the U.S. Fulbright Distinguished Chair for the United Kingdom at the University of the Arts in London, and as a Senior Visiting Fellow at the London School of Economics. His research and teaching interests include comparative urbanism, the design of cities, architectural history and theory, and urban visual cultures. Prof. Heathcott's work has appeared in a wide range of journals, books, magazines, reports, and exhibitions. He has been invited to lecture, consult, and judge studio reviews around the U.S. and internationally, most recently at Glasgow School of Art, Trinity University in Dublin, Yale University, and the University of Amsterdam. He is President-Elect of the Society for American City and Regional Planning History, and until recently served on the boards of the Center for Urban Pedagogy and the Urban History Association.

Dr. Guido Cuyvers is working since 1975 at Kempen University College in Geel, Belgium. He holds a doctorate in criminology from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, is master in sexology and bachelor in philosophy. His teaching relates to psychology, psychopathology and organizational behaviour. The core domain of his research is gerontology. He is founder of the Flemish Research and Knowledge Centre for the Third Age at the Kempen University College. He was for 25 years lecturer in the teacher training of psychologists and pedagogical scientists at the KU Leuven. In his university college he was the general coordinator of the educational innovation. At the moment he is head of the department of Social Work at the Kempen University College. He has frequently been a member of assessment committees for higher education.

Mr. Karel Van den berghe is Master in Geography, specialization physical Geography (Ghent University, 2012, magna cum laude). His master thesis examined the spatial configuration of the hydrological cycle in the Belgian coastal region. In the period of the assessment of 4Cities, Karel is a student in the Master Spatial Planning (UGent). His master thesis will follow up on his first one. The purpose is to examine the future challenges for the spatial management of the hydrological cycle focused on the river basin of the 'Brugse Polders'.

APPENDIX 2

Time Schedule
of the site visit

26th September 2012

| | |
|---------------|--|
| 10:20 – 10:30 | arrival of assessment panel |
| 10:30 – 12:00 | private meeting – assessment panel |
| 12:00 – 13:00 | faculty board (dean, faculty secretary), faculty coordinator, representatives of 6 universities + Policy |
| 13:00 – 14:00 | lunch of the assessment panel |
| 14:00 – 14:30 | students connected by skype (students in Denmark) |
| 14:30 – 15:00 | students in Brussels, also student members in the educational council |
| 15:00 – 16:00 | lecturers, independent academic personnel ZAP-lecturers (delegations) of the 4 cities, 6 universities |
| 16:00 – 16:45 | private meeting, study of materials |
| 16:45 – 17:30 | personnel responsible for the student support and guidance (on faculty and on central level), ombudsperson, person responsible on faculty level for internationalisation |
| 17:30 – 18:15 | site visit: lecture halls, library, with PPT presentation of the 4 cities, 6 universities |
| 18:15 – 19:15 | graduates from the programme (telephone, list of numbers) |
| 19:15 – 20:15 | reception – meeting with faculty board, authors of the self-evaluation report, faculty coordinator |
| 20:15 – 20:45 | transport to the hotel |
| 20:45 | private dinner assessment panel |

27th September 2012

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| 9:30 – 10:30 | counselling hour: private conversation with assessment panel on demand |
| 10:30 – 12:00 | private meeting of assessment panel |
| 12:00 – 12:45 | faculty board (dean, faculty secretary), faculty coordinator – representatives of the 4 Cities, 6 universities |
| 12:45 – 15:15 | lunch – private meeting – assessment panel, preparation of report on first impressions |
| 15:15 | public report of the first impressions of the assessment panel |



Ravensteingalerij 27
B-1000 Brussels

T +32 (0)2 792 55 00
F +32 (0)2 211 41 99

www.vluhr.be
info@vluhr.be