# RESEARCH MASTER OF ARTS IN PHILOSOPHY

KU LEUVEN

CONDUCT-TAILORED ACCREDITATION • ASSESSMENT REPORT

*28 MAY 2022*

Prof. DR. B. van den Brink (chair) • Prof. Dr. N. Karafyllis, prof. DR. T. De Mey, Drs. G. Dzidziguri (panel members) • A. Detant (secretary) • D. Provijn (process coordinator)

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# 1    Executive summary

The panel commends the Institute for providing a clear and transparent SAR, organized in light of three questions that describe the Research Master of Arts in Philosophy (RMA) in all its aspects: (1) 'What does the programme intend?', (2) 'How does the programme realise its intentions?', and (3) 'How is the achievement of these intentions demonstrated?'. To answer these questions, the report gave well-structured information in three chapters: 1. Profile and Vision; 2. Education and teaching process; 3. Assessment and quality assurance.

The RMA is an English-taught programme that has the ambition to attract excellent students from all over the world and preparing them for a PhD trajectory. Depending on their background and study-level, students can opt for a one-year abridged track (60 ECTS) or enrol into the full RMA programme (120 ECTS). The RMA covers a broad training in philosophy and philosophical research, as well as the exploration and development of an individual specialized research interest and expertise, in view of a proper thesis preparation.

The programme focuses on broad education and text orientation, which is adequate for the research field. Overall, the panel found an interesting and attractive, well-conceived and balanced, somewhat classical programme. The RMA offers five majors or specialisations that are backed by five Research Centres with a high international profile. The active participation of students in the Research Centres is an explicit objective of the RMA. At the same time, students are encouraged to be creative and critical, work independently and find their own research path.

Notwithstanding its praise for the programme, the panel identified a number of topics for clarification and improvement: 1) the broad versus specialist approach in the curriculum; 2), the set-up and place of the common seminar (CS), the philosophical content and the skills teaching; 3) access, diversity and representation in the RMA; 4) coherence of teaching and assessment practices; 5) evaluations by students and feedback in the QA system. These questions coincide largely with the challenges identified in the SAR by the Institute itself.

The panel found a well-articulated sense of autonomy and academic freedom in the faculty. This fits the ambition of combining broadness and specialisation across divides. If the RMA can be qualified as a programme of 'diversity within unity', the panel found the coherence in the programme more challenging. In view of the further development of the programme, the panel recommends to strengthen the operationalization of the shared vision. The panel advises to build more explicit integrative elements between the five philosophical strands. To bring the interdisciplinarity between the specialisations to the forefront, transforming the CS into the place to exchange on real-world philosophical themes and address problems that transcend the traditional meta-philosophical and methodological boundaries of the Research Centres, could be a valuable option. Further, the curriculum could benefit from more coherence in the didactical approach, more clarity on the assessment forms and criteria for the courses and the programme as a whole. Last, the panel recommends to pay attention to the diversity and gender balance of the student population, and suggests measures to attract the full potential of a motivated student body into the programme.

The Hague, 28 May 2022

On behalf of the expert panel convened to assess the Research Master of Arts in Philosophy:


Prof. Dr. B. Van den Brink                                                    A. Detant
(chair)                                                                              (secretary)

## 2    Examination of the panel

The panel studied the Self-Assessment Report (SAR) and its annexes, as well as the additional information provided by the programme prior to the site-visit.

The panel commends the Institute for providing a clear and transparent SAR, organized in light of three coherent questions that well describe the Research Master of Arts in Philosophy in all its aspects: (1) 'What does the programme intend?', (2) 'How does the programme realise its intentions?', and (3) 'How is the achievement of these intentions demonstrated?'.

To answer the questions, the report gave well-structured information in three chapters: 1. Profile and Vision; 2. Education and teaching process; 3. Assessment and quality assurance. In addition, the many links in the report led the panel to a wealth of more detailed information. This was useful to obtain a good insight in the programme objectives, the focus and specialisations offered, the target audience and admission procedure (chapter 'Profile and Vision'). Further, the SAR describes well how the programme is structured, including different majors and electives; it provides good information on the faculty that is teaching the programme, the teaching formats and research components applied, as well as the infrastructure and services provided to the students (chapter 'Education and teaching process'). The panel found the SAR also informative to understand the process of assessments of and feedback by students, and to get a good insight in the system of quality assurance (chapter 'Assessment and quality assurance'). Lastly, the panel appreciates the open and self-critical approach taken by the programme management and demonstrated in the SAR (Chapter 3.5 Aims for the future).

The Research Master (RMA) is an English-taught programme (with an option to take some courses in Dutch) that aims to attract excellent students from all over the world. Based on the SAR, the exchanges during the site-visit and the additional information studied, the panel found an interesting and attractive, somewhat classical programme whereby the RMA offers five majors or specialisations. These are backed by five Research Centres with a high international profile that together contribute to the excellent research reputation of the KU Leuven Institute for Philosophy. With the Husserl Archive involved, the RMA certainly benefits from an outstanding profile in philosophical research worldwide.

The panel finds the RMA programme well-conceived and balanced, with a clear ambition of preparing the group of international students that gets admitted into the programme for a PhD trajectory. The panel understood that the admission procedure is strict, requiring a broad background in philosophy at bachelor or master's level. The management targets a selection of the best international students that obtained good grades (minimum 75%) and have academic ambitions.

The programme focuses on broad education ("comprehensiveness") and text orientation, which is adequate for the research field, although the panel remarks that textual orientation is more important in some philosophical traditions than in others (e.g. pivotal in continental philosophy versus less essential in analytic philosophy). The exemplary library plays a central role in the programme and offers great facilities to the students. The library proves to be up-to-date and is well funded when considering the number of annual acquisitions. The panel however remarks that the opening hours could be more generous to allow all students sufficient access to the facilities, also those working or with family obligations.

Depending on their background and study-level, students can opt for a one year abridged track in the RMA (60 ECTS) or enrol into the full RMA programme (120 ECTS). The panel deems a two-year 120 ECTS programme necessary to achieve the LO of the RMA, as these cover a broad training in philosophy and philosophical research, as well as the exploration and development of an individual specialized research interest and expertise, in view of a proper thesis preparation.

The core courses are directly linked to current research projects led by faculty staff members. Besides the core courses, students can take seminars from other research fields than their major and are offered a wide range of electives. This set-up allows them to study related fields and expand their research domain as they wish. The professional, more practical academic skills like writing a research paper, a research proposal or prepare an academic presentation, etc. are trained in the Common Seminar. The panel finds it positive that there are also contemporary initiatives, like the 'Disciplinary Future Self' and the 'HIW Skills Lab' that offer insight in the professional field of academia and provide help for students at any stage of the writing process.

The ambition to orient the students to a PhD career and to prepare for excellence in philosophical research translates into a number of choices in the teaching and assessment, like the yearly Graduate Student Conference where RMA students can present their own work and engage in philosophical and methodological discussions with professors, researchers, PhD students and peers. Also the requirement to prepare a publishable article as the final product of the RMA must be seen in this light, and is praised by the panel as adequate and relevant.

The active participation of students in the Research Centres of the Institute for Philosophy is an explicit objective of the RMA, and the panel understood that the faculty engaged in the Institute is driven to get students involved in the ongoing research of the different Research Centres.  The panel confirms that the Faculty capacity is impressive and constitutes good guidance to allow students in the RMA to prepare for an academic career. At the same time, student autonomy in the selection of research topics is said to be highly valued and students are encouraged to be creative and critical, work independently and find their own research path.

Regardless of the positive picture and the detailed information found in the SAR, the panel identified a number of topics for clarification during the online site-visit. These are not identical to but coincide with the points flagged by the RMA as challenges to be solved.

### 2.1   Broad versus specialist approach

The fundamental **choice for a combination of the broad and the specialized elements of the programme** is a first aspect that was extensively discussed during the site-visit. According to the Institute, a good philosopher combines specialisation with a broad outlook. This ambition has been reflected in the Programme Specific Learning Outcomes and translated into the programme structure and the options offered.

While the choice of their major and the topic of their Research Paper and/or Master's Thesis allows students to specialise in a certain philosophical area, the core courses or seminars from other research areas and the broad electives give students the opportunity to study related fields and to broaden their study as they please. To the Faculty, students must be able

to situate their own research within a larger philosophical framework and explain its significance within this framework.

The panel sees the choice for broadness and specialisation as an exemplary element of the RMA. At the same time, it generates a number of tensions and requires to carefully balance between the learning outcome of specialisation and the learning outcome of broad education. This tension has also been identified by the programme management as a point of attention.

In its examination, the panel therefore wanted to better understand how the researchers in the Research Centres of the Institute relate to this broadness and specialisation. Further, the panel wanted to grasp how this ambition of broadness and specialisation is implemented in practice. It was discussed with management, teaching staff, students and alumni during the online site-visit what it means for the organization of and between different research institutes and how it is for students to navigate here.

While the panel did not find one common, shared approach on the matter of broadness versus specialisation, the faculty members share the concern to open the minds of students to different approaches to philosophy. Regardless of their specialisation, the faculty identifies with and stands for the RMA as one programme. The RMA courses work towards a broad perspective that is needed, before going in-depth into a specialisation offered in the Research seminars. Students can specialize and at the same time make connections between different philosophical periods and methods. This permits them to get acquainted with various approaches.

Students and alumni showed much appreciation for the options offered in the RMA. They felt welcome and supported and identified as being part of one programme, notwithstanding the different strands. The great freedom to follow their own path and research interest, while being stimulated to look beyond the borders of the own specialisation and engage in broader meta-philosophical discussions, is a major point of attraction of the RMA for students.

The panel thus found a well-articulated sense of autonomy and academic freedom in the faculty that fits the ambition of combining broadness and specialisation across divides. The programme composition and electives allow for engaging discussions with and amongst researchers and students of the different specialisations. Students are attracted by both the broadness and the options for specialisation. They experience the RMA programme as coherent and consistent, and all stakeholders with whom the panel exchanged, expressed their appreciation for the five different philosophical strands that are part of the DNA of this RMA programme.

If the RMA can be qualified as a programme of 'diversity within unity', it appeared to the panel that the coherence in the programme is more challenging. Working together across different research specialisations results in an attractive, broad programme in terms of philosophical content, whereby a plurality in approaches is offered. Yet, it seems to depend on the agency of students themselves to trace a coherent path, and to make the connections across diverse philosophical content.

Following its observations, it struck the panel that the programme shows to be more coherent from an insider perspective than what one could expect from the outside. The RMA

is mainly branded as continental philosophy and some majors stand out as unique (i.e., phenomenology and the focus on Platonism in ancient philosophy). However, all five Research Centres that make up for the specialisations offered, are essential to the identity of this RMA. The panel therefore advises the management to work on the branding and to better inform the public and prospective students worldwide of the programme in all its broadness and diversity of philosophical traditions and strands. The panel is convinced that it could help to attract more students to all of the specialisations offered, all the more as the research in political and analytic philosophy at the Institute is done by small research groups, yet with an excellent international record. The panel learned from the additional information provided, that all Research Centres in the Institute have similar success rates of graduates that obtain a PhD position at KU Leuven.

## 2.2 Philosophical content, common seminar and skills teaching

A second question examined by the panel in the exchanges during the site-visit concerns the **philosophical content and the role and place of the common seminar and the skills teaching.** The Common seminar (CS) gathers students of all domains, with different levels, diverse backgrounds and research skills (different majors). The panel wanted to understand how this diversity is taken on board in the set-up and teaching in the Common Seminar. It examined how the teaching staff uses this diversity to engage in common philosophical discussions. This question was also triggered by the self-reflection, as the SAR indicated that the Common seminar and its place in the curriculum raises a number of mixed feelings and points for improvement. During the site-visit the panel also wanted to clarify what the vision of the faculty and staff is on the way forward.

The panel has understood that the CS focuses on standard academic skills, where students learn what it is to be an academic. As an academic philosopher they need to be able to develop a research question, to give a presentation, write an academic article that is publishable. The teaching staff underlined that not all students might like the approach in the CS, yet learning about academic codes and certain standard formats in academia is considered important for their further career development. The panel understands this reasoning, yet it advises to also pay attention to transferable skills for other fields of employability, as not all of the RMA students will end up in a doctoral programme or academic position.

The panel also questioned whether sufficient attention goes to the more creative aspects of doing philosophy. It learned from the exchanges that the CS focuses on standard academic skills, but implicitly invites students to develop originality, creativity, and research autonomy. Content-wise it is up to the students to develop this and come up with interesting ideas. They will then have opportunities to fully mature and showcase their creativity and research talent in their research work and the RMA thesis.

In order to respond to the criticism expressed in student feedback on the CS, the panel advises the management to reflect on possibilities to modify the scope of the CS. To the panel the CS could be redesigned and repositioned, so that not only critical thinking, but also creative thinking and problem solving can be developed and applied by all students of the RMA. The panel sees value in giving the CS a more prominent place in the curriculum. It suggests transforming the CS into the place to address problems that transcend the traditional meta-philosophical and methodological boundaries of the Research Centres, and exchange on real-world philosophical themes (for instance, academic freedom, disability in

practice, effective altruism, climate change, taxation, fake news, and treatment for crime). This would not only stimulate creative thinking and problem solving skills, but turn the CS into a lab where the practical skills are related to contemporary content matters, and as such add to the broad outlook of the programme.

In addition to this, and following the exchanges with students and alumni, the panel learned that the good instructions regarding to skills (writing, presentation, references, bibliographical) provided in the CS are not always taken up in the Research Seminars, that are mostly focused on philosophical content. Integration between academic skills and engaging with philosophical content could thus be stimulated. The panel suggests to strengthen this connection, challenge students to practice and apply their philosophical knowledge and academic skills (in particular presentation skills) in a consistent way throughout the RMA programme, and take this seriously in the feedback and feedforward to students.

In addition, the panel also recommends to explicitly work on the interdisciplinarity between the five Research Centres and their specialisations. One of the concerns of the panel is to what extent there is an understanding of the mutual dependence of philosophical specialisations on each other? The CS (or eventually the Open Research seminars that are prone for improvements, following shared criticism in the evaluations done by students), could be the place where the specialisations mutually inform each other about what they do, where methodology is discussed and good practices are exchanged. The panel therefore wonders whether a further development of such awareness could not be beneficial to create 'philosophically multidisciplinary' classrooms.

## 2.3  Access, diversity and representation

The matter of **access to the RMA programme, diversity and representation** was a third point of attention that the panel examined during the site-visit.

Although the Research Master has strict admission requirements, every academic year there are 40 to 50 students enrolled, the majority of which are international students. Most of the students enrol in the abridged programme.

The panel wanted to understand what the vision is on the preferred composition of the student population for the RMA (ratio Flemish/Belgian/European/non-European students). It learned that the programme management is satisfied with the current ratio and the high numbers of international students that enrol in the RMA. The programme management targets to attract the very best students. The academic potential and motivation of the candidates is thereby predominant. If nationality is not important, strong academic commitment is essential. In order to attract a better student body and be accessible to the full range of best students, the Institute offers scholarships to promising candidates from less-well-off social backgrounds. In addition, financial support is also offered to students that show 'excellence' and a drive for an academic career. The panel is positive about the efforts that were undertaken by the Institute to provide financial help and give tuition waivers (funded by donations) to support under-privileged students. In order to avoid elitism and further increase diversity in the RMA, the panel suggests to expand this initiative.

The management further confirmed to reflect on additional ways to select the best students. On the one hand more could be done to promote the programme and make good publicity for it. The panel suggested in this regard to better promote all the specialisations that make

up the DNA of the RMA programme (see above). On the other hand, the management believes that reviewing some aspects of the admissions procedure might serve this purpose (asking for writing samples of candidates, doing interviews, etc.).

The panel had also questions about the requirements in terms of disciplinary background and requested clarifications on the access policy towards candidate students with other backgrounds than philosophy. The admission procedure to this programme is so that only those with a degree in philosophy can enter directly into the RMA. Motivated students with a Bachelor in another discipline (e.g. theology) are allowed to the regular one-year master programme that is broader. After finishing the regular master in philosophy, they can eventually enrol in the abridged RMA if their grades are good enough. The panel understands the reasoning of the management. The panel is positive about the fact that interested students with other relevant disciplinary backgrounds and academic ambitions in philosophy have the possibility to obtain an RMA degree within the period of 2 years.

Last the panel enquired whether the RMA applies an active selection for a certain composition of the student body. From the information that it has received, the panel noted a limited presence of female students in the RMA. While the management acknowledges the issue and said to be looking into implicit bias in the admission process, it also admitted that there is no systematic approach to examine the matter, nor ways to solve this imbalance. The panel learned that there is a university-wide diversity group established. Yet, so far the university has not developed guidelines or tools to counter the imbalances in the student population in terms of gender or other.

As to the gender imbalance, much is left to the Institute itself that is aware of the gap, but has not yet given this matter full priority. The panel finds the low numbers of female students a matter of concern and invites the programme management to seriously examine the reasons for this gender imbalance in terms of enrolled students (and possible drop-out). It also underlines that working on gender balance in the Institute should be a matter of concern to all, and should not be left in the hands of female professors only. At the same time, and in order to promote equal access and full diversity in the student population, the panel advises the management to look for support from the central services of the University. A lot of serious research has been done into bias in admissions procedures and the importance of embedded representation regarding e.g. gender and cultural backgrounds in academic programmes. The programme, and KU Leuven more broadly, would benefit from such an evidence-based approached. According to the panel, the programme may expect institutional support for this at the university level.

The panel sees room for improvement in terms of role models in the Institute. Though the quality of the faculty staff is beyond doubt, the panel is convinced that a good representation of female professors can help to attract more female students, and be more attentive to their specific needs for support and services. The panel agrees that the plans of the Institute to introduce a mentoring programme for female students at RMA and PhD level can be a first step in the direction towards more equality and gender balance.

Another related subject that was discussed, is the matter of community building in the RMA. In the academic environment, people leave for doing their master (MA) or PhD elsewhere, and it is in the nature of the international programme that the community changes in its make-up. Nonetheless, students and alumni confirmed that they feel very welcome at the

Institute of Philosophy and there is no strict line between RMA and regular MA Students in the Institute. Rather than identifying with the specialised RMA cohorts of students, there appears to be a sense of belonging to the Institute of Philosophy.

At the same time, students are of the opinion that the Institute could do more to nurture commonality and stimulate the identification of students as being part of a student/research community. If COVID-restrictions made bonding somewhat more difficult, international students do feel that the relationship with Flemish students is not straightforward. Meeting and mingling is not self-evident, and international students identify as being a somewhat separate group. To actively integrate international students, more efforts could thus be done, both at the level of the Institute, as of the student association.

A suggestion from students and alumni is to reinforce the materiality of space in which students can meet and discuss in informal ways. They recommend having a neutral, common space to socialize amongst philosophy students of the MA and RMA (both Flemish and international students). Next to the support for extra-curricular activities that can help reinforce student links and friendships (and thus well-being), the panel advises that the Institute takes into account this good proposal to reinforce the ties amongst all of its MA and RMA students.

## 2.4 Coherence of teaching and assessment

The panel used the exchanges with management, teaching staff, students and alumni to investigate the matter of **coherence in teaching and assessment** that remained vague in the SAR. The panel remarks that not much is said about the way advanced teaching and learning in the RMA programme is actually implemented. Integrative research elements between the different majors are not apparent from the information provided. It is not specified either if the programme has a unifying didactical approach.

The panel thus wanted to know by which concrete actions the vision is realized within the programme: which didactical choices are made at programme level, which are left to individual professors, and how is a research-driven, activating approach realized? For a "research master", the panel also expected a bit more explanation on what "research" can mean in Philosophy (for example: editorial practices, archival methods, biographical research on philosophers, gender aspects in philosophy and in philosophies?).

The exchanges with management and teaching staff confirmed that much is left to the power of the research groups and of the individual professors. Though there is a dialogue within the faculty and there are a number of initiatives for quality control and coherence and calibration (see further), lots is done from great autonomy and academic freedom.

The Institute acknowledges that the balance between rigid structures and pre-defined processes on the one hand, and full freedom on the other hand is not an easy one. The diversity within the programme of different types of courses and evaluation forms is said to be part of the broad look into philosophy that the Institute endorses. Yet, some initiatives exist to discuss methods and teaching, look for good practices across diversity of content, teaching forms and assessment methods, to accommodate all learning styles and allow the diverse student body to play upon its strengths.

The panel learned that there is a focus on the coherence within the respective research seminars. It is positive about the practice to invite (internal and external) guest speakers to the Research Seminars and have doctoral students joining them as well, so that the students experience that they belong to a true research community.

The panel nevertheless remarks that, so far, the Institute did not explicitly invest in an interdisciplinary dialogue between the different philosophical traditions. The panel believes that opportunities to organise and reinforce this dialogue should be stimulated.
It is convinced that the five research groups will benefit from the broad approach that has been taken, if it is part and parcel of the programme that the different fields in philosophy can and should learn from each other. The panel suggests to create a real space where the different forms of philosophy and philosophizing are discussed. In its opinion, the step towards thematic seminars with several groups participating, is a promising one that should be strongly supported.

Another point where coherence can be reinforced and the shared vision operationalized, is the assessment practice. The panel learned from students and alumni that the assessment process and criteria are not always clear beforehand and that the grading tends to differ between courses, depending on the respective professors. The panel noted that this point is part of the internal discussions in the faculty and refers back to the tension between autonomy and academic freedom on the one hand, and more streamlined and standardized processes and procedures on the other hand.

In order to clarify the criteria of grading and increase the transparency for students, more coherence at programme level could be helpful. The panel advises the management and teaching staff to offer more guidance to students in what is expected and how they will be assessed. The use of rubrics for each course and the development of an assessment matrix for the programme, linked to the learning outcomes of the domain and of the RMA, could be useful tools in this regard. Moreover, such an exercise could stimulate an exchange within the faculty on testing and assessment practices, and reinforce calibration throughout the programme; this instead of reserving the calibration exercise for the thesis work, as is now the case.

Related to the assessment matter, the panel learned that students, especially those with clear academic ambitions to enter into a PhD trajectory, tend to delay finishing their thesis. Taking more time to improve their thesis work and getting the best possible grades, is quite regularly considered the better option as compared to finishing within the deadline with lower grades. The panel understands that the high ambition and sharp competition for PhD positions pushes students in this direction, and acknowledges that the programme is not fully in control of this process. Nevertheless, the programme should do all things possible to encourage students to finish within the 2-year period of the RMA.

Students themselves suggest that the heavy workload and many deadlines coming together make it really difficult to finish in time. For those in the full RMA programme, the workload related to the research paper in year 1 seems to be disproportionate compared to the number of credits one obtains for it. The panel suggests that the management looks into this matter and rebalances expectations, workload and credits where justified. Further, the management could envisage an earlier start in the process of writing the thesis and schedule standard, regular exchanges with the supervisors and amongst peers on the progress of the

work. The panel also suggests an even closer follow-up of students during their thesis work, with clear intermediary deadlines to encourage good advancement of the work.

## 2.5 Evaluations and feedback in QA system

The last point of consideration for the panel during the site-visit is the matter of quality assurance. The panel understands that the RMA makes use of the internal quality assurance method at KU Leuven, called COBRA (Cooperation, Reflection and Action, with attention to Checks & Balances). At the end of each four-year quality assurance cycle, the programme reflects on the achieved educational quality. This exercise is based on qualitative and quantitative input by internal actors (students, teaching staff) and external actors (professional field, alumni, international peers) and results in a full COBRA report (to be used by the Programme Committee and consulted by the university community) and a public (shortened) COBRA report.

The panel sees that the exercise allowed the RMA programme to identify the most important points of concern, as indicated by various stakeholders. The panel appreciates the self-critical and open attitude of the management and teaching staff, not only in its self-assessment report, but also in the exchanges during the site-visit.

The panel is positive about the transparency of the Institute. It acknowledges that the QA cycle should be sufficient to monitor the programme in all its aspects and to remedy where necessary. Nevertheless, the panel wanted some clarifications about the way student evaluations in the RMA are organized, the role of the Programme Committee ('Permanente Onderwijscommissie'), and the way the programme management handles the feedback received. The panel at the same time noted that the management has not yet examined reasons for drop-out in the RMA and advises it to do so; this also in view of possible corrective measures to be taken to increase diversity and gender balance (see above).

The faculty and RMA programme follow the university-wide policy and the standard procedures for student evaluations: every course in the programme is evaluated by students every second year. When instructors of a course change, the course is automatically subject to an evaluation. At the end of a semester, all students are given the opportunity to comment on a number of key aspects of teaching (objectives, course material, teaching methods, evaluation criteria, etc.). The results are presented to the individual instructors and then discussed in a small committee chaired by the Vice Dean for Education and the Vice Dean of the International Programme, and including staff and student representatives. This committee looks at the results of the student evaluations and calls for adjustments if necessary.

From the SAR and the exchange with students and alumni, the panel learned that student evaluations are positive overall. Yet, the panel sees that where shared criticism was expressed by the students, the RMA management has been flagging these matters internally.

If students are consulted in an open and anonymous process to evaluate the programme and its components, the outcome of the analysis is less transparent. To most students, it is generally not clear what is done with the results. Results of evaluations are treated as confidential by the management. Yet, student representatives are involved in discussions of the programme committee. In respect of anonymous student surveys and confidential results for staff members, the panel sees room to inform students in more general terms on what is

done with their feedback and to increase transparency on the outcome of student evaluations.

Overall, in terms of information and services offered to students, the panel is very positive. Students can find a clear overview of all Student Services on the website of the Institute, and show to be aware of the relevant contact points in the faculty or in central services. The transparent communication between the student office and students is appreciated by the panel; it also praises the initiative of the 'Ambassadorship for KU Leuven' whereby prospective students can ask their questions to enrolled students.

# 3    Judgement

Based on the information in the SAR and the additional information received, as well as on the exchanges during the online site-visit, the panel comes to a positive conclusion on all aspects of the RMA programme.

The panel looked at the LO of the programme and deems a two-year 120 ECTS programme necessary to achieve the LO of the RMA, as these cover a broad training in philosophy and philosophical research, as well as the exploration and development of an individual specialized research interest and expertise, in view of a proper thesis preparation.

The panel identified a number of elements of the programme that stand out as exemplary. The fundamental choice for a combination of the broad and the specialized elements constitute the characteristic of the RMA that can be qualified as a programme of 'diversity in unity'.  While students are supposed to specialize, they must also be able to situate their own research within a larger philosophical framework and explain its significance within this framework.

The panel confirms that the **profile and vision** of the programme are well-conceived and balanced though somewhat classical. The RMA offers five majors or specialisations, backed by five Research Centres with a high international profile that together contribute to the excellent research reputation of the KU Leuven Institute for Philosophy.
The focus on text orientation is adequate for the RMA in philosophy overall. The exemplary library plays a central role in the programme with text orientation and offers great facilities to the students.

The management shows a clear ambition of reaching the best international students with an academic interest in the field. It has constituted the RMA as a stepping stone for preparing the international group that gets admitted into the programme for a PhD trajectory. The admission procedure is strict, yet the panel has learned to its satisfaction that the structure of the programme (full or abridged RMA) allows motivated students with other relevant backgrounds to access the RMA.

The panel however invites the management to reflect on its admission process and take measures to attract the full potential of a motivated student body. Given the gender imbalance within the student population so far, the panel urges the programme management and the faculty as a whole to examine in an evidence-based way the causes for the imbalance and take adequate measures to redress the factors that disadvantage female students to enrol in (and successfully terminate) the RMA. In this regard, the panel also sees room for improvement in terms of role models and hence embedded diversity in the Institute. Though the quality of the faculty staff is beyond doubt, the panel is convinced that a good representation of female professors can help to attract more female students, and be more attentive to their specific needs for support and services.

With regard to the **education and teaching process**, the active participation of students in the Research Centres of the Institute for Philosophy is an explicit objective of the RMA. The faculty is driven to get students involved in the ongoing research of the different Research Centres. At the same time, student autonomy in the selection of research topics is highly valued.

To the panel, the excellent and broad Faculty in the Research groups that participate in the RMA constitutes good guidance to allow students to prepare for an academic career. A number of choices in the teaching and assessment, like the yearly Graduate Student Conference and the requirement to prepare a publishable article as the final product of the RMA, fit the ambition of the programme to orient the students to a PhD and are praised by the panel as adequate and relevant.

Yet, the choice for broadness and specialisation generates a number of tensions and requires to carefully balance between the learning outcome of specialisation and the learning outcome of broad education. While the vision of the faculty and teaching staff is clearly formulated, the panel sees room for improvement in the promotion and implementation of the shared vision.

The panel advises the management to better inform the public and prospective students worldwide of the programme in all its broadness. It is convinced that more students could be attracted by the diversity of philosophical traditions and strands that make up for the specialisations offered at KU Leuven, and are essential to the identity of this RMA.

The panel also recommends to reinforce the shared vision in the didactical approach across the different majors and electives, and in the criteria adopted to assess whether learning objectives of the programme as a whole are met at the right RMA level.

To the panel the coherence in the programme is a challenge that should be tackled more explicitly. The panel found a well-articulated sense of autonomy and academic freedom in the faculty that fits the ambition of combining broadness and specialisation across divides. Yet, though students need their study trajectories and electives to be approved, it seems to depend on their agency to trace a coherent learning path, and to make the connections across diverse philosophical content.

The panel also recommends to plainly work on the interdisciplinarity between the five Research Centres and their specialisations. It invites the management and teaching staff to examine the value of creating 'philosophically multidisciplinary' classrooms for the RMA. The step towards thematic seminars with several groups participating that has been suggested by the teaching staff, is a promising one that should be strongly supported.

The panel also sees value in giving the CS a more prominent place in the curriculum. It recommends transforming the CS into the place to address problems that transcend the traditional meta-philosophical and methodological boundaries of the Research Centres, and exchange on real-world philosophical themes. This would not only stimulate creative thinking and problem solving skills, but turn the CS into a lab where the practical (professional) skills are related to contemporary content matters, and as such add to the broad outlook of the programme.

Further, the panel advises to reinforce the exchanges in the Faculty on the didactical approach that is predominantly left in the hands of the individual professors. The panel recommends the management and teaching staff to offer more guidance to students in what is expected and how they will be assessed. The use of rubrics for each course and the development of an assessment matrix for the programme, linked to the learning outcomes of

the domain and of the RMA, could be useful tools in this regard. Moreover, such an exercise could stimulate a more structured exchange within the faculty on teaching, testing and assessment practices, and reinforce calibration throughout the programme.

The panel suggestions to inform about and streamline the **assessment practice** also results from the signals provided by students and alumni on heavy workloads, a concentration of deadlines for deliverables, and a tendency to delay finishing their thesis.

The panel suggests that the management looks into this matter and rebalances expectations, workload and credits where justified. Further, the panel suggests an earlier start in the process of writing the thesis, regular exchanges on the progress of the work, and an even closer follow-up with clear intermediary deadlines to encourage good advancement of the work.

As to the **quality assurance**, the internal quality assurance method at KU Leuven, called COBRA, is adopted. The panel confirms that the programme has an adequate system in place that allows regular monitoring of the programme and its components, an open procedure for systematic student evaluations of courses and of all main aspects of the curriculum, a mechanism to analyse and discuss modifications needed and to integrate the student feedback into the programme revisions. The panel is satisfied with this approach and applauds the open and self-critical attitude of the programme management to continuously improve where necessary. The practice to involve student representatives in the QA system is positive. Yet, the panel advises be transparent towards all students involved in the RMA on how their feedback is translated into practice.

To conclude, the panel confirms that the RMA is an ambitious, balanced, somewhat classical programme in which an excellent and broad faculty ensures a curriculum that is driven by the willingness to offer a broad outlook into philosophy and philosophical research, and orienting students towards specialisation. The RMA has very good facilities and clear information about it. The involvement of staff and students is high, the lines of personal contact are short, students and stakeholder satisfaction is generally positive. Though some more efforts could be done in terms of community building, RMA students feel to be part of a research community. The main recommendations of the panel in view of the further development of the programme concern the operationalization of the shared vision, the room for more coherence in the didactical approach, attention to the diversity of the student body, more clarity on the assessment forms and criteria for the individual courses and the programme as a whole. The panel also recommends to build more explicit integrative elements between the five philosophical strands or majors, and to redefine the common seminar so as to make it a classroom where practical skills and philosophical discussions can be combined to the benefit of the diverse student body enrolled in the RMA.

# 4 Review process

The assessment was carried out in line with the 'Assessment framework programme accreditation customised to own conduct – June 2020' as ratified by the Flemish Government on 27 November 2020.

The panel prepared itself for the assessment on the basis of the self-assessment report submitted by the institution when applying for accreditation. Prior to the preparatory meeting of the panel, each panel member formulated initial impressions and questions were listed. During a preparatory online meeting on 29 April 2022, the panel discussed all information received in the application file and also prepared the virtual dialogue with the programme (institution). Impressions and questions were updated before the dialogue with the institution.

A virtual dialogue took place on 9 May 2022 with the programme management, staff, students, alumni and representatives from the professional field. The digital platform used was Zoom.

During the dialogue the panel investigated the context of the programme and the institution and collected all required information to make a judgement on the quality of the programme.

During a closed meeting of the panel on 9 May 2022 the panel discussed all information obtained and translated it into a holistic judgement. The panel took this conclusion in full independence.

All information obtained led to a draft assessment report that has been sent to all panel members. The feedback from the panel members has been processed. The assessment report adopted by the chairman was submitted to NVAO on 28 May 2022.

## Annex 1: Administrative data regarding the institution and the programme

| | |
|---|---|
| Institution | KU Leuven |
| Address, institution website | Naamsestraat 22 Bus 5000<br>3000 LEUVEN, BELGIË |
| Programme | Research Master of Arts in Philosophy |
| Level and orientation | Research Master |
| (Additional) title | NA |
| (Parts of) field of study(s) | Philosophy and Moral Sciences |
| Specialisations | • Ancient, Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy<br>• Metaphysics and Philosophy of Culture<br>• Phenomenology and Continental Philosophy<br>• Political Philosophy and Ethics<br>• Analytic Philosophy |
| Programme routes | NA |
| Location where the programme is offered | Leuven |
| Teaching language | English |
| Study load (in credits) | • 120 ECTS -2-year full programme<br>• 60 ECTS -1-year abridged programme |
| New training in Flanders | No |
| Programme-specific learning outcomes | Yes – See annex 2 |
| Connecting options and potential further education | PhD |

# Annex 2: Programme-specific learning outcomes

*1.    Specialised philosophical knowledge in context*
1.1.   Have a profound knowledge of the recent, "state of the art" research work in her/his chosen field of research;
1.2.   Be able to engage at the highest level with the key texts in her/his chosen subdomain;
1.3.   Have genuine insight into the ongoing research of other philosophical domains;
1.4.   Be able to situate her/his own research within a much larger philosophical framework and be able to explain its significance within this framework;

*2.    Research skills*
2.1.   Be able to formulate independently a well-defined and original research question;
2.2.   Be able to independently develop a well-defined research approach appropriate to the topic of study;
2.3.   Be able to independently conduct the research necessary for adequately addressing the research question through close reading of primary sources (preferably in the original language) and critical use of a wide range of secondary sources;

*3.    Philosophical skills*
3.1.   On the basis of independent research in the student's philosophical subdomain be able to develop a personal philosophical standpoint and defend it in debate;

*4.    Writing skills*
4.1.   Be able to clearly present the results of the student's research in written form in both shorter papers and a master's thesis, all displaying signs of professional philosophical standards;

*5.    Presentation skills*
5.1.   Be able to clearly present and defend orally the results of the student's research;

*6.    Intellectual maturity*
6.1.   Possess sufficient intellectual maturity to proceed to doctoral studies;
6.2.   Be able to take initiative and use creativity in the pursuit of high level research;
6.3.   Be able to efficiently organise her/his research work;

*7.    Professional skills*
7.1.   Be able to present a paper at a professional philosophical meeting;
7.2.   Be able to write an article that meets professional standards;
7.3.   Be able to compose a grant application in a professional manner;
7.4.   Be able to write an application to PhD programmes;
7.5.   Be familiar with the publication process;
7.6.   Be able to communicate effectively both in research and more general professional contexts

# Annex 3: Composition of the panel

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

**Prof. Dr. Bert Van den Brink** *(chair),* Dean, Full Professor of Philosophy, University College Roosevelt/Utrecht University, The Netherlands;
**Prof. Dr. Nicole C. Karafyllis** *(panel member)***,** Full Professor of Philosophy, Technische Universität Braunschweig, Germany;
**Prof. Dr. Tim De Mey** *(panel member)***,** Assistant Professor, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands;
**Drs. Gvantsa Dzidziguri** (*student panel member)*, Ba in History, Ma in Public Policy and Administration, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia.

The panel was assisted by:
- **Dagmar Provijn**, policy advisor Flanders NVAO, process coordinator;
- **Anja Detant,** secretary.

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

# Annex 4: Schedule of the site visit

**9 May 2022 (online dialogue)**

| Time | Meeting |
|---|---|
| 08:30 – 09:00 | Preparatory meeting panel |
| 09:00– 10:00 | Session 1: dialogue with programme management |
| 10:30 – 11:30 | Session 2: dialogue with students |
| 12:00 – 13:00 | Session 3: teaching staff |
| 13:00 – 14:00 | Lunch + closed meeting of the panel |
| 14:00 – 15:00 | Session 4: dialogue with representatives of the professional field + PhD-students + alumni |
| 15:00 – 16:30 | Closed meeting of the panel + meeting with programme management (16:00 – 16:30) |
| 16:30 – 17:15 | Closed meeting of the panel – preparation final dialogue |
| 17:15 – 18:00 | Closing dialogue with programme representatives |
| 18:00 – 18:15 | Closed meeting of the panel – practicalities |

## Annex 5: Overview of the material studied

*Self-Assessment Report*
- Self-Evaluation Report – Research Master of Arts in Philosophy + Appendix

*Documents made available during or leading up to the dialogue*
- Self-Evaluation Report – Research Master of Arts in Philosophy: additional data
- Syllabi examples
- 2 Research Papers and 2 Master Theses
- Evaluation forms for Research Paper and Master Thesis
- Questions of course evaluations

## Annex 6: List of abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| COBRA | Cooperation, Reflection and Action, with attention to Checks & Balances |
| CS | Common seminar |
| ECTS | European Credit according to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System |
| LO | Learning outcomes |
| NVAO | Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie) |
| RMA | Research Master (programme) |
| SAR | Self-Assessment Report |