



M Archaeology (research)
University of Groningen

Assessment of conditions

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Summary

Standard 2. Teaching-learning environment

The initial assessment of the University of Groningen’s research master Archaeology in 2020 was conditionally positive, stating four conditions with regard to the teaching-learning environment (standard 2):

- Make changes to the programme in such a way that the course content can fully and equally contribute to individual student development. Irrespective of their individual learning trajectories, the programme should enable all students equally to employ key module content in their thesis preparation.
- Make differentiations for first and second year students in the taught core courses acknowledging progressive learning in terms of knowledge and skills. This will ensure that all students are assessed dependent on stage and progression level.
- Introduce submission dates and formal deadlines coupled to embedded alternative assessment, to facilitate the completion of the taught components and thesis in a timely manner.
- Show the impact of the planned, and any additional, improvements to the support, monitoring, structure, and progression of the thesis and tutorials to allow students to complete in a timely manner.

Based on its assessment of these conditions, the panel concludes that the restructuring of the programme has been successful in terms of the build-up of the curriculum and the ordering of its parts, and the differentiation between first and second year students in the compulsory components. All students are now enabled to employ key module content in their thesis preparation, and the curriculum is conducive to progressive learning for all students. The introduction of clear dates and deadlines, as well as regulations concerning these deadlines, has improved the programme’s feasibility. The introduction of a tutorial class and the improvement of the thesis trajectory have resulted in better support, monitoring, structure and progression for students taking these components. The panel appreciates the work that has been done to achieve these improvements and the careful way in which the process was shaped with the inclusion of all stakeholders, both at programme and at Faculty level. It congratulates the programme with the positive changes and concludes that all conditions set in the original assessment have been met.

Score table

The panel assesses the programme as follows:

M Archaeology (research)	
Standard 1: Intended learning outcomes	meets the standard
Standard 2: Teaching-learning environment	meets the standard
Standard 3: Student assessment	meets the standard
Standard 4: Achieved learning outcomes	meets the standard

General conclusion **positive**

Prof. dr. Jacqueline Mulville, chair
Date: 17 November 2023

Dr. Fiona Schouten, secretary

Introduction

Procedure

Context

The research master Archaeology of the University of Groningen's Faculty of Arts was assessed by an external panel on 11 and 12 November 2020 as part of the Archaeology, Classics and Ancient Civilizations and Region Studies cluster assessment. The assessment followed the procedure and standards of the NVAO Assessment Framework for the Higher Education Accreditation System of the Netherlands (September 2018). It also followed the Specification of Additional Criteria for Research Master's Programmes (May 2016).

The assessment panel advised the NVAO to accredit the programme conditionally due to issues it encountered with the curriculum and guidance structures concerning Standard 2 (Teaching-learning environment). Based on the panel report, the NVAO conceded the programme conditional reaccreditation, requiring the programme to provide the NVAO with an additional report demonstrating that the conditions were met by 15 February 2024.

Preparation

The University of Groningen requested quality assurance agency Academion to coordinate the assessment of conditions. Dr. Fiona Schouten of Academion acted as coordinator and secretary of the assessment. She has been certified and registered by the NVAO.

In communication with the University of Groningen and the research master's programme Archaeology, Academion approached the panel members who made up the initial accreditation panel in 2020:

- Prof. dr. J. (Jacqueline) Mulville, professor Bioarchaeology and Director of Research and Impact at the School of History, Archaeology and Religion at Cardiff University (UK) [chair];
- Prof. dr. M.B.H. (Martin) Everaert, professor Linguistics at Utrecht University;
- Prof. dr. J. (Jeroen) Poblome, Professor of Archaeology, KU Leuven;
- R. (Rory) Granleese, alumnus research master Archaeology at Leiden University and quality assurance officer at Delft University [student member].

The NVAO approved the panel on 12 June 2023.

The programme prepared a status report on the implemented improvement plan. This status report was made available to the panel members and secretary in preparation of the online visit. Prior to the visit, the panel studied this report as well as a number of supporting documents (see appendix 2). The University of Groningen composed a site visit schedule in consultation with the Academion secretary (see appendix 1).

Online site visit

On 21 September 2023, the research master Archaeology was assessed in an online site visit by the panel to determine whether the programme had fulfilled the conditions imposed in the initial assessment. After a preparatory meeting, the panel discussed its initial findings based on the documentation with the programme management, students, programme committee, and examination board involved. It then reported its conclusions and findings to the programme management as well as students and staff.

Report

After the online site visit, the secretary composed a draft report in consultation with the panel and sent it to the programme in order to have it checked for factual irregularities. The secretary discussed the ensuing comments with the panel chair, and changes were implemented accordingly. The panel then finalised the report, and the secretary sent it to the Faculty of Arts of the University of Groningen.

Information on the programme

Name of the institution:	University of Groningen
Status of the institution:	Publicly funded institution
Result institutional quality assurance assessment:	Positive
Programme name:	Archaeology (research)
CROHO number:	60133
Level:	Master
Orientation:	Academic
Number of credits:	120 EC
Location:	Groningen
Mode of study:	Fulltime
Language of instruction:	English
Submission date NVAO (assessment of conditions):	15 February 2024

Description of the assessment

Introduction

The research master Archaeology was assessed by an external panel on 11 and 12 November 2020 seeking initial accreditation. The panel advised the NVAO to accredit the programme conditionally. It posed the following conditions with regard to Standard 2 of the assessment framework (Teaching-learning environment):

- Make changes to the programme in such a way that the course content can fully and equally contribute to individual student development. Irrespective of their individual learning trajectories, the programme should enable all students equally to employ key module content in their thesis preparation.
- Make differentiations for first and second year students in the taught core courses acknowledging progressive learning in terms of knowledge and skills. This will ensure that all students are assessed dependent on stage and progression level.
- Introduce submission dates and formal deadlines coupled to embedded alternative assessment, to facilitate the completion of the taught components and thesis in a timely manner.
- Show the impact of the planned, and any additional, improvements to the support, monitoring, structure, and progression of the thesis and tutorials to allow students to complete in a timely manner.

The Board of the NVAO adopted these conditions and granted the research master Archaeology conditional accreditation on 15 February 2022. Based on the issues signaled by the panel, the programme formulated a revision plan, which it implemented in 2022-2023. This report uses this revision plan and its implementation as the basis for an assessment of the conditions imposed by the previous assessment panel.

Standard 2. Teaching-learning environment

The curriculum, the teaching-learning environment and the quality of the teaching staff enable the incoming students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

Findings

Programme changes

In the original assessment, the panel pointed out that the programme's curriculum design was not conducive to progressive learning for all students. The programming of its compulsory courses (50 EC) with regard to the thesis trajectory did not guarantee that all students started working on their thesis before having completed all compulsory courses. Study progression was further compromised by a course rotation system, in which each core course was offered only once every other year, and by flexible components (40 EC, including 10 EC in national research school courses) and a thesis trajectory (30 EC) whose planning and completion depended strongly on students' own initiative.

The programme revised its curriculum to address these issues, in accordance with its 2021 recovery plan. The programme decided to retain the rotating structure in order to be able to offer its limited number of students a broad knowledge basis that includes all different branches of the discipline and the different methodological approaches in a viable manner. The current curriculum design (see appendix 3) has been streamlined to distinguish more clearly between the various compulsory and flexible components, and to

guarantee that the structure of the programme and the content of the individual modules contribute to individual student development. All compulsory courses (55 EC) have now been placed in semesters I and III. Depending on the year in which they enrol, students now start with either semester I or semester III, while semesters II and IV are always followed at the end of year 1 and year 2, respectively.

The two rotating semesters of compulsory courses (I and III) have a similar, but not identical build-up. Semester I contains three 10 EC courses; semester III consists of two 10 EC courses, a 5 EC compulsory course on research and professional skills, and a 5 EC flexible component. Since the rotation system is still in place, students in certain years will follow their skills course at the start of their programme, while students in other years take it in the third semester. The panel discussed the nature and timing of the skills course with programme representatives. The programme management as well as the students made clear that the skills course is not the central course where key research skills are taught. This is done throughout the compulsory courses, and at the start of the thesis trajectory in semester IV. Rather, the skills course focuses on such topics as research integrity, data management, and professional skills, such as interviewing. It also deals with academic writing, in such a way as to be relevant both to the thesis and to smaller papers that the students write in the programme. The panel appreciates the fact that the programme has taken care to ensure that the skills module is relevant to all students following it and that its timing does not hamper individual student development.

The *flexible components* (25 EC) are now mainly scheduled in semester II, except for the 5 EC course in semester III mentioned above. Students are offered the opportunity to follow courses in other (research) master's programmes in Groningen or elsewhere. However, they usually opt for tutorials: small research exercises on a topic chosen by the student and carried out under supervision of a staff member. Students told the panel that these courses allow them to specialize and acquire specific research skills in line with their personal preferences. The tutorials in semester II are accompanied by a tutorial class. This provides a support structure during a period when students may not have any other shared courses. As an additional flexible component, students also choose 10 EC in national research school courses or events (1-3 EC each), which they can follow throughout the two years but which the programme allows most space for in semester II.

The panel discussed the flexible components and their planning with programme representatives. It learnt that students don't usually follow the 10 credits for research school ARCHON in semester II, depending on what is offered and on the personal preference of the student. The programme has quality checks in place to ensure that the way students shape their curriculum results in a feasible spread of course workload, including the ARCHON courses. Students have annual progress meetings with the Director of Studies where their plans and progress are discussed, including the ARCHON activities they plan to participate in.

The programme tried out different ways of distributing the compulsory modules across the semester. In 2021-2022, it had one compulsory course in the first, and one in the second half of the semester block, while the third course ran across the entire semester. However, based on student feedback, the programme returned to having all three courses running parallel across the entire semester, as it proved difficult to cover the material, while allowing sufficient time for preparation and timely completion of assignments within half a semester.

The panel concludes that the new curriculum design constitutes a major improvement. It shows a more logical order and ensures that all students have completed the necessary compulsory elements before embarking on their thesis. In this way, all students are enabled to employ key module content in their thesis

preparation during semester IV. The panel applauds the careful way in which the redesign took shape, in consultation with all stakeholders. It concludes that the first condition has been met by the programme.

Differentiation between first and second year students

The programme implemented measures to ensure differentiation between first and second year students in the rotating compulsory core courses which they follow together, in order to ensure a progressive learning pathway across the programme's two years. This was done in various stages. First, a distinction was made between general academic skills and knowledge, or skills related to the content of the specific module. These two sets of skills were weighed differently in the assessment of first and second year students, with general academic and professional skills counting more for first year students and more advanced scientific or module-specific skills counting more for second year students. Conversely, first year students received more guidance with, or feedback on academic skills than second year students.

Second, after evaluation of the two-year cycle of compulsory modules, the programme decided to further improve and clarify differentiation. After overcoming some initial technical difficulties, it introduced separate course codes for the first and second year versions of each compulsory course. Courses where first and second year students come together now have separate spaces in the Brightspace digital learning environment, and separate syllabi that make explicit what is expected of every group. In the syllabi, the assessment and the differentiation methods are indicated clearly by means of rubrics for both continuous and final assignments. More recently the teacher and the students have started actively discussing the distinctions made between the two groups in class.

The panel appreciates the differentiation that has been established and the way this is communicated to students. Students that the panel interviewed were positive on the result, noting that the expectations for each group and the differences between them are communicated clearly in the syllabi, on Brightspace, and in class. The panel concludes that differentiation between first and second year students has been introduced in a careful and well-executed manner and that the condition has been met.

Introduction of submission dates and formal deadlines

In the original assessment, the panel found that students suffered delays due in part to the non-enforcement of deadlines, in both the courses and the thesis. The programme remedied this issue by setting and enforcing clear deadlines for submitting the final assignments of compulsory courses. In addition, resit possibilities were defined and regulated, and delays penalized. The programme also set up a clear exemption procedure for students dealing with mitigating circumstances. For students with personal circumstances, there is an opportunity to re-sit for a third time, so the rotation system will not cause a 2-year delay if a student fails an exam. The thesis trajectory was also revised to include clear milestones, deadlines and regulations regarding delay and resit possibilities. For the flexible components, similar procedures were followed.

The panel discussed the new working method with students, staff, programme, and faculty management, as well as the Board of Examiners. It learnt that many of the measures taken, such as the deadline and penalization system, have been adopted not only in the programme, but also across the faculty. The panel is pleased to hear that the improvements were made in this wider context and congratulates both the programme and the Faculty Board with the result. The panel approves of the clearer deadlines in both the core and the flexible elements of the programme. It learnt from students that they consider the new structure and deadlines to be clear and helpful. The panel concludes that the condition it posed with regard to deadlines and submission dates has been met.

The Board of Examiners mentioned that a side effect of the stricter deadlines has been that the thesis grades, and as a result of this the number of cum laude distinctions, have gone down. Students no longer have the time to keep on working on their thesis, improving and finetuning it until they obtain cum laude, and therefore achieve different results. The panel suggests investigating the marking system in order to take into account the new structure of the thesis trajectory. In this context, it may also be wise to rethink the relatively large size expected of theses (between 20,000 and 30,000 words), particularly since there is a tendency in the natural science-oriented archaeology disciplines to produce shorter journal articles.

Improvements to the support, monitoring, structure, and progression of the thesis and tutorials

In the original assessment, the panel remarked that support, monitoring, structure, and progression of tutorials and theses needed to be improved to avoid study delays. For the tutorials, the programme introduced a mandatory tutorial class in semester II. Its aim is to support students throughout the period they work on their tutorials – from the moment they finalize the selection of topics and supervisors to submitting the final draft. The class provides milestones, for instance for the submission of tutorial forms or first drafts, and offers structure when student cohorts are pursuing individual interests. It also offers a social environment and the opportunity to share experiences and reflect on progress.

The programme also introduced ‘clustered tutorials’, i.e. individual research assignments of 5 EC carried out in a group of 2-5 students supervised by a member of staff. Students carry out individual, but related assignments which fall under a general theme. Clustered tutorials provide structure and clear deadlines, and enable students to learn from each other while working on their own separate assignments.

From 2023-2024 onwards, there is a new option for flexible components: teaching assistantships (5 ECTS). Students can provide teaching assistance to a lecturer teaching a BA course on the area the student specializes in. The student assists in general teaching tasks and active learning activities. They are assessed on the basis of their overall performance, independence and organizational abilities, as well as on a report evaluating active learning methods. The programme expects that teaching assistantships will help improve completion rates because of their clear shape and structure.

The panel appreciates the additional structure provided to students following tutorials, and the option to follow these in small groups. It considers the teaching assistantship to be a promising innovation. Students that the panel interviewed confirmed that the tutorials are well-organized and allow timely completion. The first results from the new approach that the panel was shown seem to suggest an upward trend in tutorial completion rates compared to earlier years, although the changes are too recent to allow for any definitive conclusions here.

As for the thesis, the programme made significant improvements in the monthly thesis class in response to the panel’s original critique. The thesis class is now taught exclusively in semester IV, while it used to run across the entire year. It is also separated from the MA thesis class, in order to address the specificity of the REMA thesis. Its aim is to monitor students’ progress at the cohort level by paying more attention to process and time management. Classes are organized along specific milestones (thesis contract, research design, incorporation of feedback, first draft, etc.). The last meeting in June, when students prepare their final draft, consists of voluntary presentations during a dedicated Research Seminar. This helps students process and digest their argument, and provides them with further feedback by peers and members of staff.

The panel applauds the improvement of the thesis trajectory. It learnt from the data provided by the programme that the impact of these measures is monitored and that there seems to be improvement visible when it comes to completion rates – although this cannot yet be concluded at this early stage. The panel

recommends continuing to monitor these rates carefully, also at a Faculty level, and finding a clear and insightful way to present the data to internal as well as external stakeholders. The panel learnt to its satisfaction that a midterm cycle of internal programme evaluations is currently being planned within the Faculty of Arts that will certainly benefit from such data. It concludes that the condition regarding support, monitoring, structure, and progression of tutorials and thesis is clearly met.

Considerations

The panel concludes that the restructuring of the Research Master's in Archaeology has been successful in terms of the build-up and order of the curriculum and the differentiation between first and second year students in the compulsory components. All students are now enabled to employ key module content in their thesis preparation, and the curriculum is conducive to progressive learning for all students. The introduction of clear dates and deadlines, as well as regulations concerning these deadlines, has improved the programme's feasibility. The introduction of a tutorial class and the improvement of the thesis trajectory have resulted in better support, monitoring, structure and progression for students taking these components. The panel appreciates the work that has been done to achieve these improvements, the careful way in which the process was shaped with the inclusion of all stakeholders, both at programme and at Faculty level. It congratulates the programme with the positive changes and concludes that all conditions set in the original assessment have been met.

Conclusion

The panel concludes that the programme meets standard 2.

General conclusion

The panel's assessment of the programme is positive.

Appendix 1. Site visit schedule

21 September 2023 (online, via Teams)

09.00	10.00	Preliminary discussion panel
10.00	10.30	Interview programme management
10.30	11.00	Break
11.00	11.30	Interview students
11.30	12.00	Interview Programme Committee
12.00	13.00	Lunch break
13.00	13.30	Interview Examination Board
13.30	14.30	Panel discussion
14.30	15.00	Feedback session panel

Appendix 2. Materials

Self-evaluation ReMa Archaeology, with appendices:

1. Revision plan 27 September 2021
2. Previous accreditation report and NVAO decision
3. Quantitative data
 - a. Thesis results
 - b. Tutorial completion success of enrolled ReMa students
 - c. Completion rates compulsory courses
4. Syllabi
 - a. Syllabus Archaeological Theory 2023-2024 first years
 - b. Syllabus Archaeological Theory 2023-2024 second years
 - c. Syllabus DML 2023-24 first years
 - d. Syllabus DML 2023-24 second years
 - e. Anthropocene Syllabus 2023-24 first yrs
 - f. Anthropocene Syllabus 2023-24 second yrs
5. Annual reports PC / EC
 - a. Attachment 5A Annual report PC 2020-2021
 - b. Annual report PC 2021-2022
 - c. Jaarverslag ECL 2020-2021
 - d. Jaarverslag ECL 2021-2022
6. Course evaluations
 - a. Evaluation Thesis Class 2021-22
 - b. ReMa Archaeology first year students Tutorial Class Evaluation
 - c. Report Panel Discussions ReMa Archaeology 2021-22
 - d. Material Culture and Science Panel Evaluation report 2022-2023 semester 1
 - e. Research and Professional Skills Panel Evaluation report 2022-2023 semester 1
 - f. The Archaeology of Settled Landscape Panel Evaluation report 2022-2023 semester 1
7. Evaluation Board of Examiners 'Death as a mirror of life'

Appendix 3. Programme curriculum

Year 1		Year 2	
Sem I	Sem II	Sem III	Sem IV
Compulsory Module 1 (10 ECTS)	Compulsory Module 3 (10 ECTS)	Compulsory Module 4 (10 ECTS)	Thesis (30 ECTS)
Compulsory Module 2 (10 ECTS)	Flexible Component 2 (10 ECTS)	Compulsory Module 5 (10 ECTS)	
Flexible Component 1 (10 ECTS)	National Research School Courses (10 ECTS)	Flexible Component 3 (10 ECTS)	

Fig. 2. Programme for cohort 2018-2019 (before accreditation)

Year 1		Year 2	
Semester I	Semester II	Semester III	Semester IV
Compulsory Module 1 (10 ECTS)	Flexible Component 1 (10 ECTS)	Tutorial class	Thesis (30 ECTS)
Compulsory Module 2 (10 ECTS)	Flexible Component 2 (10 ECTS)		
Compulsory Module 3 (10 ECTS)	National Research School Courses	Compulsory Module 4 (10 ECTS)	Thesis class
		Compulsory Module 5 (Skills) (5 ECTS)	
		Flexible Component 3 (5 ECTS)	

Fig. 3. Programme for cohort 2021-2022 (during revision period)