

Reassessment report
Limited Framework Programme Assessment

Research Master Spatial Sciences

University of Groningen

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1. Executive summary

In this executive summary, the assessment panel presents the main findings and considerations underlying the reassessment of the quality of the Research Master Spatial Sciences programme of University of Groningen. In this reassessment process, the panel specifically verified whether the programme fulfilled the conditions set. The basis of this reassessment rests on the decision taken by NVAO on 1 March 2022, in which the conditions to be fulfilled were stated as follows.

- (1) To ensure the research master students attain the research master level when taking regular master courses, by meeting the extra, more complex, in-depth requirements as articulated in the intended learning outcomes of the research master programme in order to differentiate their learning activities and learning outcomes in the regular master courses clearly from those of regular master students.
- (2) To ensure research master students are assessed at the research master level when taking regular master courses by requiring more complex, in-depth summative assessments or examinations for them in or clearly connected to these regular master courses.

Research Master Spatial Sciences programme management and Faculty of Spatial Sciences representatives have put in substantial effort to improve the programme and to fulfil the two conditions set. The main improvements are the introduction of Deepening Modules in regular master courses and adding Researcher Development Reflections to the Scientific Reading, Debating and Reflection course.

The Deepening Modules and the Researcher Development Reflections constitute learning activities at the level of the research master, clearly differentiating these learning activities from those of regular master students. The learning outcomes of both these Modules and these Reflections are at research master level.

The assessments of the Modules and Reflections reflect the more complex, in-depth summative assessments required for research master students. The grading rubrics for the Modules meet the research master level learning outcomes articulated for these Modules. The Reflections are effective tools to assess students' developing qualities as researchers.

Having conducted the reassessment of the Research Master Spatial Sciences programme of University of Groningen, the assessment panel finds this programme to have fulfilled the conditions set by the panel, and consequently judges the programme to be positive in terms of the NVAO Assessment framework. Therefore, the panel recommends NVAO to prolong the accreditation of this programme for another term of six years.

Rotterdam, 20 June 2023,

Prof. L.J. de Haan PhD
(panel chair)

W. Vercouteren
(panel secretary)

2. Programme administrative information

Name programme in CROHO:	Research Master Spatial Sciences
Orientation, level programme:	Academic Master
Grade:	Master of Science (MSc)
Number of credits:	120 EC
Specialisations:	Economic Geography Economic Geography: Regional Competitiveness and Trade Real Estate Studies Population Studies Socio-Spatial Planning Environmental and Infrastructure Planning Cultural Geography Cultural Geography: Tourism Geography and Planning Islands and Sustainability
Location:	Groningen
Mode of study:	Full-time (language of instruction: English)
Registration in CROHO:	21PC-60660
Name of institution:	University of Groningen
Status of institution:	Government-funded University
Institution's quality assurance:	Approved

3. Findings, considerations and assessments

3.0 Improvement process

Findings

On 7 June 2021, the assessment panel visited the Research Master Spatial Science programme of University of Groningen. At the end of the site visit, the panel chair informed programme representatives the judgement regarding the programme would be conditionally positive with two conditions imposed. These conditions referred to the level of teaching and of examinations of the regular master courses students of this research master programme take. This judgement was put in writing in the panel's assessment report, sent to programme management on 7 September 2021. On 1 March 2022, NVAO published their decision on the accreditation of the programme, this decision being fully in agreement with the assessment panel's advice.

The conditions specifically refer to the Thematic Theoretical Specialisation courses (six courses of 5 EC each) and the Advanced & Specialised Research Methods courses (three courses of 5 EC each), constituting in total 45 EC of study load in this 120 EC programme. These courses are courses at master level which are taken by research master students of this programme as mandatory courses.

The improvements in the programme were led by the research master coordination team, being composed of the programme director and two closely involved lecturers. The coordination of the improvement process was laid in the hands of this team of three persons because of the efforts considered needed to fulfil the conditions set. Another relevant factor in this respect was the substantial growth of the programme in terms of student numbers as a consequence of the Erasmus Mundus status of the Islands and Sustainability track of the programme. The Erasmus Mundus track has been set up in collaboration with universities in Spain, Greece and Iceland.

The coordination team had the active support of education management of the Faculty of Spatial Sciences, who took part in the discussions about the improvements considered needed and who provided extra means to enable the improvements to be implemented. The Programme Committee was consulted by the coordination team throughout the years and gave advice in order to fine-tune the improvements. The Board of Examiners both in 2022 and in 2023 reviewed the changes made to the programme to meet the conditions set and verified whether examinations and assessments were in line with course goals and programme intended learning outcomes. The coordination team met two times with the University of Groningen Support Team to discuss the improvements made to the programme.

After having been informed about the conditionally positive judgement and the conditions set, programme management started the process to improve the programme in order to fulfil these conditions. In October 2021, the improvement plan was drafted and submitted to NVAO. NVAO approved the plan. In the academic year 2021 – 2022, the changes articulated in the improvement plan were carried out. These changes constituted requiring research master students to draft and

submit Extra Assignments in the regular master courses on top of the work all students had to do in these courses. Although these Extra Assignments were assessed within the regular master courses, they were collected in portfolios within the Scientific Reading, Debating and Reflection course (SRDR course) in the research master programme. In the SRDR course, the Extra Assignments were input for formative group Researcher Reflections. The evaluation of these Extra Assignments at the end of the academic year pointed to shortcomings and some lack of clarity. In the academic year 2022 – 2023, the set-up was changed to address the downsides. The Extra Assignments were transformed into Deepening Modules. These Modules include drafting, supervision and assessment of extra, in-depth assignments. From this year onwards, they are completely supervised and assessed within the regular master courses and entirely detached from the SRDR course. The group Researcher Reflections in the SRDR course have been changed into three Researcher Development Reflections throughout the course with individual feedback sessions to better reflect the individual nature of the reflections. The study load of the SRDR course has been increased from 5 EC to 10 EC, being 5 EC per year, to meet the learning activities of students in this course. To make room for this change, the mandatory course Scientific English Writing (5 EC) was made optional.

Considerations

The panel finds Research Master Spatial Sciences programme management and Faculty of Spatial Sciences representatives to have put in substantial effort to improve the programme and to fulfil the two conditions set. The panel notes improvements were designed and implemented quite soon after the panel's judgement. This swift response allowed programme management to try various routes for improvement and to gain insight into which measures would work best.

The panel notes various bodies and committees of the Faculty and the programme were involved in the improvement process. The panel appreciates the three-person coordination team leading the improvements, as this set-up was conducive to the effective implementation of the improvements. The various bodies and committees within the organisation played their part in accordance with their responsibilities and tasks. The panel has established both the Programme Committee and the Board of Examiners to be in agreement with the changes made to the programme to fulfil the conditions set.

The panel is positive about the subsequent changes programme management adopted to implement the improvements needed to fulfil the conditions set. Through these changes, the improvements became more effective. One of the favourable changes in this respect was the integration of the Deepening Modules in the regular master courses and their decoupling from the SRDR course.

The panel feels continuous monitoring of the work load of lecturers and students in the programme would be important.

3.1 First condition

The first condition is to ensure the research master students attain the research master level when taking regular master courses, by meeting the extra, more complex, in-depth requirements as articulated in the intended learning outcomes of the research master programme in order to differentiate their learning activities and learning outcomes in the regular master courses clearly from those of regular master students.

Findings

Programme management introduced two new, additional parts of courses in the programme in order to fulfil the conditions set. These are the Deepening Modules as part of the regular master courses within the programme and the Researcher Development Reflections as part of the Scientific Reading, Debating and Reflecting course (SRDR course).

The Deepening Modules are assignments, being part of each of the regular master courses. The set-up of the Modules is the same for each of these courses. Students are expected to complete the Deepening Modules at research master level. The description of the Modules in the course outline informs students about the requirements. Students are supervised by the lecturers of the regular master courses in drafting and completing the Deepening Modules. Students are expected to approach course lecturers, proposing topics for these Modules. Lecturers and students may meet to discuss topics and to agree on them. After having completed the Deepening Modules and after these having been graded, students may obtain additional written and/or oral feedback on their work from their lecturers. Research master programme management informs both students and lecturers regularly about the objectives and planning of the Deepening Modules. Students are offered the opportunity to have two of the Deepening Modules checked by the University Language Centre for the level of academic English used. When students of the Islands and Sustainability track take master-level courses abroad, they are required to submit Deepening Modules. In the course outline of the Deepening Modules, programme management listed the learning outcomes of the Modules and demonstrated them to address the intended learning outcomes of the research master programme. In the assessment plan of the programme, the relations between the Deepening Modules and the programme intended learning outcomes are made explicit. The learning outcomes are different for the Thematic Theoretical Specialisation courses and the Advanced & Specialised Research Methods courses, due to the different themes and subjects covered in these courses. The programme intended learning outcomes addressed also differ for these two types of courses.

To the Scientific Reading, Debating and Reflecting course (SRDR course), which already contains literature study and writing and discussing individual diaries, have been added the Researcher Development Reflections. At three specific points in time during this two-year course, students are to submit two-page reflection papers about their development towards becoming independent scientific researchers. The instructions for each of the three Researcher Development Reflections are different and evolve, depending on the different stages in this process students find themselves in. Having submitted the written Reflections, students have individual, 30-minutes feedback

sessions with one of the course coordinators. These sessions are meant to deepen students' understanding of being researchers and their prospective researcher careers. All students, including students taking the Islands and Sustainability track, take the SRDR course and participate in the Researcher Development Reflections. The course outline of these Reflections informs students about their contents and outcomes. Programme management demonstrated the learning outcomes of the Researcher Development Reflections to meet the intended learning outcomes of the research master programme.

Considerations

The panel finds the Deepening Modules to constitute more complex, in-depth learning activities at the level of the research master, clearly differentiating these learning activities from those of regular master students. The panel also established the learning outcomes of the Deepening Modules being at research master level. Seeing the Deepening Modules to be standardised across the courses, the panel encourages programme management to continue developing the Modules either in the current standardised format or in more differentiated formats. The panel notes the way in which lecturers supervise students and the frequency with which they do so differs across courses. Programme management could consider formalising elements of the supervision process to be less dependent upon the pro-active attitude of students. The panel appreciates research master programme management informing both master courses' lecturers and students regularly about the specific nature of the learning activities and learning outcomes of the Deepening Modules.

The panel assesses the Researcher Development Reflections learning activities, both the papers and the individual feedback sessions, to be at research master level. As the panel has established, the learning outcomes of these Reflections meet the level of the research master as well. The panel is positive about the study load of the SRDR course having been increased from 5 EC to 10 EC to take into account the additional Researcher Development Reflections learning activities in this course.

Assessment

These considerations have led the assessment panel to assess the programme to have fulfilled the first condition.

3.2 Second condition

The second condition is to ensure research master students are assessed at the research master level when taking regular master courses by requiring more complex in-depth summative assessments or examinations for them in or clearly connected to these regular master courses.

Findings

The Deepening Modules are assessed summatively by lecturers using standardised grading rubrics. In the grading rubrics, assessment criteria reflecting the learning outcomes of the Deepening Modules to be assessed have been listed. The assessment criteria have been given weights to determine the assessment, the content-related criteria having been given the greatest weights. On the basis of the weights of the criteria, lecturers determine whether students have passed or have failed Deepening Modules. In order to pass the course, research master students have to obtain a pass for the Deepening Module. If students fail, they have to improve their assignment and submit this again to be assessed. As has been indicated above, lecturers may give feedback on students' performances by adding written remarks or by providing oral comments.

For the Researcher Development Reflections, students have to submit two-page papers, followed by individual feedback sessions. The assessment of the Reflections rests on the feedback sessions, in which the course coordinator will put deepening questions to students on how they would want to develop their researchers' qualities. These sessions are structured around the transferable skills, theoretical knowledge, and methodological skills of students. Students are to incorporate the outcomes of the sessions into their papers. The course coordinators will grade the papers with pass or fail.

Considerations

The panel sees the assessment of the Deepening Modules as reflecting the more complex, in-depth summative assessment required for research master students. The grading rubrics for the Modules meet the research master level learning outcomes articulated for the Deepening Modules. Passing the Deepening Modules is required to pass the courses, making the Modules crucial elements in the programme as a whole. The panel thinks Deepening Modules' formative assessment aspects may be strengthened by having lecturers provide more feedback about students' performances on the assessment criteria before the actual summative assessment. In this way, students may be stimulated to attain higher levels of achievement, differentiating them further from the regular master level.

The panel regards the assessment of the Researcher Development Reflections to reflect the more complex, in-depth levels of achievement, required for research master students. These Reflections are effective tools to assess students' developing qualities as researchers. As the Researcher Development Reflections do not have actual frameworks or rubrics for grading or assessment, the panel suggests considering to log the individual sessions and to use these logs as instruments to assess these Reflections.

Assessment

These considerations have led the assessment panel to assess the programme to have fulfilled the second condition.

4. Overview of assessments

Standard	Assessment
First condition	Fulfilled
Second condition	Fulfilled
Programme	Positive

Appendix: Assessment process

University of Groningen requested evaluation agency Certiked VBI to support the reassessment process for the Research Master Spatial Sciences programme of this University. The objective of the reassessment process was to verify if the conditions set in the assessment of the programme in June 2021 were fulfilled by the programme. This reassessment process rests on the decision taken by NVAO on 1 March 2022 in which the accreditation of the programme was prolonged for two years and in which the two conditions to be fulfilled within these two years were formulated.

The panel conducting this reassessment had the same composition as in June 2021, except for the student member. The panel was composed as follows:

- Prof. L.J. de Haan PhD, Professor Emeritus of Development Studies, International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands (panel chair);
- Prof. A. Need PhD, Professor of Sociology and Public Policy; Dean Twente Graduate School, University of Twente, the Netherlands (panel member);
- Prof. J.Y. Nazroo PhD, Professor of Sociology, School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester, United Kingdom (panel member);
- Prof. G.P. van Wee PhD, Professor in Transport Policy, Faculty of Technology, Policy and Management, Delft University of Technology, the Netherlands (panel member);
- H.I. Oberman MSc, PhD candidate Methodology and Statistics, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Utrecht University, the Netherlands (student member).

W. Vercooteren served as the process coordinator/secretary in the reassessment process, having had this role also in the assessment process of June 2021.

All of the panel members and the process coordinator/secretary confirmed in writing to have no conflict of interest with regard to the programme to be reassessed and to observe the rules of confidentiality. Having obtained the authorisation by University of Groningen, the process coordinator/secretary requested the approval of NVAO of the panel to conduct the reassessment. This approval was given.

To prepare for the programme reassessment, the process coordinator/secretary met with Research Master Spatial Sciences programme management to discuss, among other things, the composition of the information dossier for the assessment panel, the site visit schedule, and the planning of activities in preparation of the site visit. In the course of the process, programme management and the process coordinator/secretary had contact to monitor the process. The activities were performed as planned. Programme management approved the schedule for the site visit.

Well in advance of the site visit, the information dossier was sent to the panel members. The information dossier contained the following information.

- Improvement plan, 25 October 2021
- Implementation report, June 2023
- Programme Assessment Plan
- Course outline Deepening Modules

- Course outline Scientific Reading, Debating and Reflecting course
- Administrative procedures for Deepening Modules
- Deepening Modules general information, student assignments and grading rubrics
- Outline Researcher Development Reflections
- Erasmus Mundus Islands and Sustainability track
- Reports University of Groningen Support Committee
- Board of Examiners minutes, 2021 – 2023
- Programme Evaluation by Board of Examiners, February 2023
- Programme Committee minutes, 2021 – 2023
- Monitoring Recovery Plan by Programme Committee

Prior to the site visit date, panel members sent in preliminary findings, based on the information dossier studied, and forwarded a number of questions to be put to programme representatives on the day of the site visit. The process coordinator/secretary summarised this information, compiling a list of questions, which served as a starting point for the discussions during the site visit.

On 4 June 2023, the panel convened to discuss the preliminary findings regarding the reassessment and to go over the questions for the site visit on the basis of the list compiled.

On 5 June 2023, the site visit was conducted on the University of Groningen campus. The site visit schedule included the following meetings.

09.00 – 09.50 Dean, Faculty representatives, programme management

10.00 – 10.45 Lecturers regular Master courses

11.00 – 11.30 Board of Examiners

11.45 – 12.15 Students, with Programme Committee student member

12.15 – 13.30 Deliberations panel (closed session)

13.30 – 13.45 Presentation main findings by panel chair to programme representatives

The chair of the Programme Committee was consulted by the panel by telephone.

In the panel deliberations, the panel considered the findings, weighed the considerations and arrived at conclusions regarding the reassessment. At the end of the site visit, the panel chair presented the broad outline of considerations and assessments to programme representatives.

The assessment draft report was finalised by the process coordinator/secretary, taking into account the findings, considerations, and assessments of the panel. The draft report was sent to the panel members, who studied it and made a number of changes. Thereupon, the secretary edited the report. This report was then presented to programme management to be corrected for factual inconsistencies. Programme management were given two weeks to respond. Having been corrected for factual inconsistencies, the final report was sent to the University Board to accompany their request to continue the accreditation of this programme.