



**university of
 groningen**

**faculty of behavioural
 and social sciences**

Research Master's Programme in Behavioural and Social Sciences

University of Groningen

Revision Plan

May 7, 2015

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Preface

This revision plan has been created together with all parties involved in the RMSc programme. A draft version has received feedback from the RMSc specialization coordinators, who discussed this draft with RMSc staff members. Both the RMSc Board of Examiners and the Educational Committee, including student representatives, have commented thoroughly on the plan. We are very thankful to our staff and the members of these committees for their valuable input. In addition, the Strategy and Quality Assurance department of the University of Groningen has provided useful recommendations for the plan.

The current version of the revision plan has been approved by the RMSc Board of Examiners, the Educational Committee, the Board of the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences, and the Board of the University of Groningen.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

On November 7, 2014, the visitation of the Research MSc (RMSc) programme took place at the Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) in The Hague for the purpose of quality assessment and accreditation.

In her evaluation report of January 26, 2015, the visitation committee judged the RMSc programme scoring 'sufficient' on standard 1, but 'insufficient' on standards 2 and 3, leading to an overall rating of 'insufficient'. In a separate meeting with the programme Director, the chair of the visitation committee clarified the evaluation outcome, providing the programme with guidance for improvement.

By letter of March 23, 2015, the NVAO informed the RUG that, based on the evaluation report, it cannot grant accreditation for the programme. Instead, the NVAO offers the opportunity to hand in a plan for an improvement trajectory. On the basis of the revision plan and the evaluation of feasibility and adequacy by the committee, the NVAO will take a decision whether to grant the programme an improvement period of two years or not.

This revision plan describes in what way we will address the comments of the visitation committee in the coming period. We will provide an overview of the changes that we propose and the expected results thereof, in order to improve the RMSc programme towards sufficient scores on the standards 2 and 3.

In Chapter 2 of this revision plan, the main points of concern of the visitation committee are outlined, and a reflection by the programme Director is presented. In Chapter 3, we describe the actions for revision that will be undertaken towards the required improvement of the RMSc programme. In Chapter 4, an integrated overview of the points of concern and the planned actions, including a time frame, is presented in a table.

Chapter 2 Points of concern of the visitation committee and reflection by the programme Director

Learning Environment (Standard 2) – qualification: insufficient

According to the visitation committee, the RMSc programme was advertised in our Critical Reflection as an interdisciplinary programme. However, the committee felt that the RMSc programme consists of five more or less independent specializations rather than constituting an integrated, interdisciplinary programme, and thus didn't meet the sketched image. This view was supported by the fact that the research groups, in which the specializations are embedded, are generally strongly monodisciplinary oriented.

In addition, and for a large part as a consequence of the separate specializations, the committee remarked that the number of students in some tracks is too low, causing a lack of group dynamics. She considered that the individual attention that RMSc students receive from working with the staff insufficiently counterbalances the negative effects of the low number of students in the specializations.

Moreover, in our Critical Reflection we indicated that students who have completed a one-year (60 EC) MSc degree without delays in one of the Behavioural and Social Sciences can be admitted as a 'RMSc zij-instromer' (lateral entry). Typically, these students get a maximum of 55 EC exemptions so that they can successfully complete the RMSc programme within one year. The visitation committee considered this 'zij-instroom' problematic and unacceptable, because students received exemptions for courses that they took at the one-year MSc level instead of the RMSc level.

Reflection on the comments pertaining to the Learning Environment

The goal of the RMSc programme management is to offer a multidisciplinary RMSc programme, i.e., a programme consisting of several (five) monodisciplinary specializations with a common basis, within an interdisciplinary environment, so we should adjust the sketched image. We feel that this combination of multi- and interdisciplinarity is working well in our programme where students from different disciplines take courses such as Reflecting on Science, and Academic Writing together, work together on their own datasets during statistics courses and discuss with each other the results obtained in light of the research questions posed, and socialize with each other a lot outside classes. However, we agree with the committee that merely offering an interdisciplinary environment without requiring students to make use of the interdisciplinary possibilities is no guarantee that all students will benefit maximally from such an environment. As we recognize that interdisciplinarity can function to broaden students' perspectives on the Behavioural and Social Sciences we will address interdisciplinarity more explicitly in our multidisciplinary RMSc programme.

With regard to the number of students in the specializations, we recognize that it's valuable for students to learn with and from each other. Although our students are consistently very enthusiastic about the small number of students in the programme and the individual attention they receive from staff accordingly, we agree with the committee that a larger number of students may be required to optimize group dynamics. This may be achieved by increasing the maximum number of students in

our programme, while at the same time maintaining quality standards, and taking financial constraints into account.

With regard to the 'zij-instroom' we used to select students at the *cum laude* level who needed to do at least an extra 5 EC of work as compensation for the exemptions for courses from a one-year MSc programme. However, based on recommendations by the Board of Examiners of the RMSc programme, we were already considering a policy change to end the option of 'zij-instroom'. This is now supported by the visitation committee, which led us to abolish this possibility of 'zij-instroom' from now on.

Assessment and Level of Achievement (standard 3) – qualification: insufficient

According to the visitation committee, the RMSc thesis assessment form is problematic. From the form, it becomes insufficiently clear who the second assessor is and what his/her role is in the process. Also, supporting the overall grade with arguments and feedback is merely optional. The committee has strongly recommended to improve the internal consistency and transparency of the grading and to make the independent role of the co-assessor more visible.

The visitation committee was also of the opinion that the RMSc programme tends to award relatively high grades and a relatively high number of *cum laudes*. The committee noticed that even when crucial parts of RMSc theses, such as method and reflection sections, were graded relatively low, students still were assigned high overall grades for their theses. Moreover, the committee noticed methodological and statistical shortcomings in several RMSc theses. In line with the previous visitation committee, the current committee has recommended to change the grading policy by using RMSc students as a reference group instead of students from one-year MSc programmes. This then may also affect the number of *cum laudes* awarded.

An additional remark of the visitation committee concerned the RMSc PhD fund. After the interview with the student and alumni delegation, the committee concluded that this fund leads to a strong competition between students and takes away students' attention from other research oriented jobs outside academia. Therefore, the committee has particularly recommended offering students opportunities to be orientated towards career options outside the university.

Reflection on the comments pertaining to the Assessment and Level of Achievement

We agree with the visitation committee that the transparency of the RMSc thesis grading process can be improved, so we will take their suggestions to heart. The quality level of the RMSc staff and the research groups involved in the programme is high, as was underlined by the visitation committee, but probably when they grade the work of RMSc students the quality standards of the Research Master are not solely used as points of reference, but also the relative performance of these students as compared to regular MSc students. Therefore we will improve procedures to guarantee adequate grading in our programme.

With regard to our PhD fund, we consider competition to some extent to be inherent to grant applications. The competition that students experience is representative of the competition in grant applications that students will come across when they choose for a career in academia. However, we agree with the committee that it should not have a disrupting effect on students, with consequences

that stretch beyond this one application. Therefore, we will take steps to address the comments of the visitation committee.

Chapter 3 Proposed revision of the RMSc programme

In this chapter we will describe our action plan that addresses the comments of the visitation committee. We have formulated separate action plans for standard 2 and 3.

Learning Environment (Standard 2)

Goal: More joint, uniformly structured programme addressing interdisciplinarity more explicitly, and a larger number of students

Visitation committee: The RMSc programme was advertised in the Critical Reflection as an interdisciplinary programme, but didn't meet the sketched image

During the revision period, we will improve the advertisement of our programme as a *multidisciplinary* programme in brochures, on websites, and internal documents (e.g. the study guide) and at the same time create more *interdisciplinarity* in the RMSc programme. We will therefore develop 2 challenging interdisciplinary courses, each based on themes centred around the main research focus areas of the University of Groningen (sustainable society, healthy aging, and energy), which will be jointly taught by lecturers from different disciplines from the Behavioural and Social Sciences. The courses will be mandatory for all students in the RMSc programme so that there will be ample opportunity for interdisciplinary exchanges among the students from different specializations. These courses will be in addition to the introductory course that is already part of the RMSc programme and in which students work in interdisciplinary groups on different projects. The aim of interdisciplinarity of the two new courses connects well to the learning outcomes that were specified in the Critical Reflection. To facilitate interdisciplinary exchanges among the RMSc students and to stimulate them to benefit from the interdisciplinary environment that the programme offers, we plan to arrange both a separate workspace for the RMSc students where they can work on computers or laptops, and interdisciplinary intervision groups where students can provide each other with feedback on their work. At the same time, we will value and continue the strong embedding of students in the research groups that are involved in the RMSc programme.

Visitation committee: The number of students in some tracks is too low, causing a lack of group dynamics

One way to increase the group dynamics among the students is by having them take more classes together. To this end, we will create more uniformity between the curricula of the different specializations without changing the learning outcomes as specified in the Critical Reflection. We will structure the set-up of the five specializations in the same way, thereby increasing the number of shared mandatory courses from 20 EC to 35 EC, while decreasing the individual study parts from 65 EC to 45 EC. To increase the number of shared courses, we will add the 2 new interdisciplinary courses to the curriculum. The mandatory courses Reflecting on Science (5 EC) and Scientific Integrity (2.5 EC) will be combined into one Reflecting on Science course of 5 EC in favour of space for the interdisciplinary courses. The course Applied Statistics will represent 10 EC in the curriculum instead of 7.5 EC. In addition, we will organize theory seminars and methods & statistics seminars that are mandatory for all students instead of offering a separate set of seminars for each specialization. During these seminars, students may also present their own work, so that they can learn from and with each other, which will also contribute to more interdisciplinarity. Furthermore, after a critical

examination of the list of optional courses in the RMSc programme, we will limit the number of courses that students can choose from in order to increase the number of students in the optional courses. To reduce the number of individual study parts, the mandatory literature studies of 10 EC in total will be removed from the programme. The size of the traineeship will be reduced with 5 EC. The seminars of 5 EC from the different specializations will be substituted by mandatory theory seminars and methods & statistics seminars that all students will take together.

This results in the following joint curriculum:

More joint courses: 35 EC mandatory for all students instead of 20 EC

- Behavioural and Social Sciences: An Introduction	5 EC
- Reflecting on Science (integrated)	5 EC
- Applied Statistics	10 EC
- 2 interdisciplinary thematic courses of 5 EC each	10 EC
- Seminars (theoretical and Methods & Techniques)	5 EC

Fewer individual study parts: 45 EC instead of 65 EC

- Traineeship	10 EC
- RMSc thesis	35 EC

Remaining space within the specializations: 40 EC

- 2 statistical/methodological courses	10 EC
- Specialization-specific mandatory theoretical courses	15 EC
- Electives (in which 1 literature study of 5 EC is allowed)	15 EC

Total	120 EC
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Furthermore, we will increase the group dynamics by increasing the maximum number of students to be admitted to the programme from 27 to 42, while still adhering to the same strict selection criteria that we are currently using. We will intensify our recruitment activities to attract a larger number of qualified students to our RMSc programme. We will also actively invite PhD students of the Graduate School of Behavioural and Social Sciences to participate in RMSc courses.

Visitation committee: The 'zij-instroom' is problematic because exemptions are awarded on the basis of courses at the one-year MSc level

The point about the 'zij-instroom' was already subject of discussion of the RMSc Board of Examiners. Supported by the outcome of the visitation we have decided to abolish the option of 'zij-instroom' from September 1, 2015. We will have a one-year transition phase during which 'zij-instroom' will still be possible for students who in the past were informed that 'zij-instroom' would be an option upon successful completion of a one-year MSc programme. The exemptions awarded during the transition phase will however need to meet the RMSc level, so when relevant, the Board of Examiners will decide to award exemptions on the condition that students successfully complete additional assignments. This no longer is limited to 5 EC, but may well exceed this (considerably) when judged necessary by the Board of Examiners.

Assessment and Level of Achievement (standard 3)

Goal: Quality improvement and better quality assurance

Visitation committee: From the RMSc thesis assessment form it becomes insufficiently clear who the second assessor is and what his/her role is in the process, and supporting the overall grade with arguments and feedback is merely optional

Based on the visitation report we will change the assessment procedure of the RMSc theses immediately. The independent assessments of the RMSc theses by two assessors will be made transparent by having each assessor fill in an individual assessment form which will be archived in the student's grading file at the Graduate School office. Both forms will then be integrated by the assessors into one assessment form, including a clear motivation of the grade. This integrated form will be handed out to and discussed with the student in order to provide feedback about the student's performance. The form will include the names of both assessors, their role in the RMSc thesis project, and their signatures. We will also improve the form by more clearly listing and weighting the criteria that RMSc theses should meet, paying separate attention to the process that has led to the thesis, which of course can only be fully judged by the first assessor (the daily supervisor).

Visitation committee: The RMSc programme tends to award relatively high grades and as a consequence many cum laudes, and therefore we recommend to change the grading policy

This point of concern was mainly based on the RMSc theses. In our Critical Reflection we indicated that the final version of the RMSc thesis should be at the level of a first draft of a research paper that may be submitted to an international, peer-reviewed journal, and as such forms the basis for a proposal for a PhD thesis. We should continue to strive to deliver these high quality theses with the accompanying high grades. Nevertheless, the visitation committee judged the past theses grades as relatively high. We will therefore improve the transparency and clarity of the criteria that RMSc theses should meet, and we will better monitor the theses quality and the grading.

Following this visitation, the RMSc Educational Committee will be involved in adjusting the assessment form. We will explicitly bring the criteria for RMSc theses to the attention of staff and students by informing them about the improved form. More generally, the criteria will be included in the RMSc study guide.

The quality of the research that students undertake for their RMSc thesis projects will be improved by replacing the Master's Thesis Committees of each of the specializations by one Master's Thesis Committee for the whole RMSc programme, consisting of five members representing the five specializations and thus including a staff member from the Psychometrics and Statistics department. Each RMSc thesis proposal will be evaluated by the Master's Thesis Committee with specific attention for the methodological and statistical aspects of the proposed research. In addition, to improve the control of the quality of the theses and the grading, every year the Board of Examiners will inspect a number of randomly selected RMSc theses from the different RMSc specializations. Among other things, the Board of Examiners will monitor the quality of the theses, whether theses are graded within the relevant frame of reference, and whether the grading is comparable between lecturers and specializations within the RMSc programme. The Board of Examiners will pay special

attention to the thesis paragraphs about methods and statistics. The quality assurance of the RMSc programme as a whole will be improved, as the monitoring of the Board of Examiners will also apply to exams. Recently, procedures have been developed which are currently being implemented. For example, during repeating three-year periods, the Board of Examiners will inspect the exams of all courses in the RMSc programme. Each exam will need to be approved by a colleague staff member and handed in together with the answer sheet. Papers and their grading sheets will also be handed in to the Board of Examiners. To further address the grading policy, the number of RMSc courses that are also part of a regular MSc programme, but for which there are additional requirements for RMSc students will be limited to a minimum. These courses will be closely monitored by the RMSc Board of Examiners to ensure that the required additional assignments correspond with the high level of the RMSc programme.

Visitation committee: We recommend to offer students opportunities to be orientated towards career options outside the university

We will actively inform our students about their career options after graduation. This will be a topic to be discussed during one of the mandatory seminars (as was currently already the case in some specializations). In addition, we will provide our students with an overview on Blackboard of the jobs that our alumni accepted right after graduation. This way, our students can get an impression of the opportunities that our diploma offers. We will also organize a 'meet our alumni day' once every two years where our RMSc students can get in contact with our alumni. We will keep informing students about vacancies that the Graduate School office is informed of, like we already used to do.

Chapter 4 Revision matrix

The revision matrix presents an integrated overview of the points of concern of the visitation committee and the planned actions, including a time frame. All planned actions will be the responsibility of the RMSc programme management. The Master's Thesis Committee will be responsible for evaluating the thesis proposals. The Board of Examiners will be responsible for the monitoring of thesis assessments and exams.

Learning Environment (standard 2)			
Remarks from the committee	Goal	Planned actions	Timetable
the RMSc programme consists of five more or less independent specializations rather than constituting an integrated, interdisciplinary programme	increasing interdisciplinarity in order to offer students a broader perspective on the behavioural and social sciences	offering 2 interdisciplinary courses, mandatory for all students	academic year 2015-2016
		requiring students to present during mandatory seminars	fall 2015
	increasing the integration among the students, facilitating them to benefit from the interdisciplinary environment that the RMSc programme offers	arranging a separate workspace for the RMSc students	academic year 2015-2016
		arranging interdisciplinary intervision groups	fall 2015
	increasing the integration of the programme by offering students a joint, uniform programme	structuring the set-up of the five specializations in the same way, thereby increasing the number of shared mandatory courses from 20 EC to 35 EC, while decreasing the individual study parts from 65 EC to 45 EC	spring 2015
	improving the advertisement of the programme	advertising the RMSc programme as a <i>multidisciplinary</i> (instead of <i>interdisciplinary</i>) programme in brochures, on websites, and internal documents (e.g. the study guide)	summer 2015
the number of students in some tracks is too low, causing a lack of group dynamics	stimulating group dynamics among the students by increasing the number of students in the courses	increasing the number of shared mandatory courses from 20 EC to 35 EC	spring 2015
		limiting the number of optional courses	fall 2015
		accepting more students into the RMSc programme	spring 2015
		actively advertising courses for our PhD students, so that they can join the classes	summer 2015
the 'zij-instroom' is problematic because exemptions are awarded on the basis of courses at the one-year MSc level	requiring all enrolled students to follow a two-year programme	abolishing the option of 'zij-instroom' immediately, but allowing for a one-year transition period for academic year 2015-2016 (i.e. the last 'zij-instromers' will enrol in September 2015) with strict criteria for exemptions and, consequently, additional assignments	spring 2015

Assessment and Level of Achievement (standard 3)			
Remarks from the committee	Goal	Planned actions	Timetable
the RMSc thesis assessment form is problematic. From the form, it becomes insufficiently clear who the second assessor is and what his/her role is in the process. Also, supporting the overall grade with arguments and feedback is merely optional	creating a more transparent assessment procedure	informing staff and students and improving the thesis assessment form. Each assessor will fill in an individual assessment form, after which the forms will be integrated, and archived at the Graduate School office. The student will receive the integrated form, including a motivation of the grade, as feedback. The form will include the names of both assessors, their role in the RMSc thesis project, and their signatures.	fall 2015
the RMSc programme tends to award relatively high grades and as a consequence many <i>cum laudes</i>	improving the transparency and clarity of the criteria that RMSc theses should meet	involving the RMSc Educational Committee in adjusting the assessment form and informing staff and students about the improved form. More generally, including the criteria in the RMSc study guide	fall 2015
	increasing control of thesis quality and grading	evaluating each RMSc thesis proposal by one Master's Thesis Committee with specific attention for the methodological and statistical aspects of the proposed research	fall 2015
		yearly monitoring of the RMSc thesis assessments by the Board of Examiners	fall 2015
	increasing control of unambiguous grading standards and benchmarks	monitoring of exams, including additional assignments, by the Board of Examiners	fall 2015
reducing the number of shared courses with one-year MSc programmes		winter 2015	
the PhD fund leads to a strong competition between students and takes away students' attention from other research oriented jobs outside academia	offering students opportunities to be orientated towards career options outside the university	actively informing our students about their career options after graduation, e.g. during a mandatory seminar, by providing an overview on Blackboard of the jobs that our alumni accepted right after graduation, by forwarding vacancies to the students	starting spring 2015
		organizing and inviting our students to our 'meet our RMSc alumni day'	spring 2016